



# *International Graduate Routes: Narratives from the UK job market*

February 2023



**AGCAS**

The Association of Graduate  
Careers Advisory Services

## ENDORSED BY UNIVERSITIES UK INTERNATIONAL (UUKi)

We welcome the publication of this timely report into the experiences of international graduates in the UK. International students make a vital contribution to the UK economy, both during their time as students, but equally as graduates, taking high-level skills and knowledge gained during their university degrees, out into the UK workplace.

This report shows that the Graduate route is well geared to provide opportunities for graduate employment with 72% of respondents successfully established in a graduate level role. But there is more to be done to promote awareness among employers, and given the importance of the Graduate route to students it is imperative that the government commits to maintaining the visa route. This will ensure that international students have the certainty and stability they need to find graduate-level work, develop their skills, and therefore maximise their positive contribution to the UK.

As this report highlights, to really build on the success of the Graduate route and to optimise the value for employers and graduates alike, it is essential to improve the data on international graduate outcomes. Engaging international graduates and UK employers will be key in this respect.

**Jamie Arrowsmith, Director, Universities UK International (UUKi)**

<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international>



## ENDORSED BY THE UK COUNCIL FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT AFFAIRS (UKCISA)

As Chair of the sector's International Student Employability Group (ISEG), UKCISA welcomes this important research by one of our ISEG members, AGCAS. It fills a knowledge gap about the UK's Graduate route, uniquely highlighting the international student voice. This research not only provides essential evidence on this flexible and competitive post-study work route, it outlines a series of recommendations to steer policymakers, sector leaders, and employers in ensuring the continued success of this route. We know how important employability is to international students and hope that this research will help us make the case for further support to ensure and demonstrate high quality international graduate outcomes.

**Anne Marie Graham, Chief Executive,  
UKCISA**

<https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/>



## ENDORSED BY THE BRITISH UNIVERSITIES' INTERNATIONAL LIAISON ASSOCIATION (BUILA)

International students are highly motivated and have a range of highly desirable skills and knowledge drawn both from their formal studies and lived experience, that hugely benefits employers across the UK. We really encourage employers to explore this rich source of employees who have been educated at universities in the UK.

**Bobby Mehta, Chair, BUILA**

<https://www.buila.ac.uk/>



## FUNDED BY THE UPP FOUNDATION

The report clearly demonstrates how important international graduates are to UK employers and the wider economy. To maintain our global competitiveness it is incumbent on the Government to work with universities and employers to ensure the UK is an attractive place to study and work.

We are delighted to have supported AGCAS's research and look forward to the recommendations being implemented.

**Richard Brabner, Director, UPP Foundation**

<https://upp-foundation.org/>



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## FOREWORD

The cultural, educational and economic benefits international students bring to our UK university campuses and local communities are extensive. For those who choose to build their career in the UK, the Graduate route visa offers a flexible employment route, allowing international students to stay in the UK for two years (three for PhD students).

Ultimately, the success of the Graduate route will be measured by positive post-study outcomes and the overall quality of the international graduate experience, however the current policy context sends contradictory messages about the importance the UK places on the evaluation of these outcomes. The decision to cease calling international graduates as part of the Graduate Outcomes survey has led to a significant decline in response rates and a diminishing evidence base at a time where the need to demonstrate return on investment to prospective international students has never been greater.

This project arose from discussions within AGCAS about how we could collectively develop our knowledge of the outcomes of international students choosing to remain in the UK after graduation. Whilst the Home Office publishes statistics on the number of Graduate route visas granted, we know very little about the actual experiences of Graduate route visa holders and their search for UK employment.

Our primary intention for the research was therefore clear; to humanise the experiences of international graduates and provide them with a platform to tell their stories of seeking UK graduate employment, primarily through the Graduate route. It was a real privilege to hear the first-hand accounts from motivated, articulate and resilient individuals who were keen to build their career in the UK.

It was pleasing to see international graduates working in a variety of graduate-level roles and with an impressive range of organisations, demonstrating the real opportunity the Graduate route visa provides to graduates and employers alike.

Yet, as a country we have not yet benefited from the full potential of the Graduate route. Behind every international graduate 'success story' were disheartening tales from graduates struggling to find UK employment. Graduates reported challenges explaining their visa status to employers and many encountered employers refusing to accept the Graduate route as a valid right to work. This can result in underemployment, unemployment, and the underutilisation of knowledge and skills developed and honed from our very own higher education system. For graduates this can have a significant detrimental impact on their wellbeing, and negatively impact their perception of the UK as a welcoming study and employment destination. Employers may also be missing out on a global talent pool that could very easily fill skills shortages.

The introduction of the Graduate route visa helped the UK to achieve the objective set out in the International Education Strategy<sup>1</sup> of recruiting 600,000 international students almost a decade ahead of time. The continued existence of the visa route alone will not in itself be enough to sustain that level of recruitment without accompanying evidence that it provides some tangible return on investment. This

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth>



research provides a useful short-term snapshot of the experiences of international graduates seeking UK employment, but further data will be required to understand the longer-term impact of the Graduate route. As a sector, we must commit to ongoing monitoring of the outcomes of international graduates. The UK cannot be complacent if it is to remain an attractive study destination for international students.

The publishing of the report coincides with a growing level of uncertainty for some of the early adopters of the Graduate route, many of whom will see their visa expire later in 2023. How many will seek longer-term UK employment (if they so wish)? How many employers currently employing a Graduate route visa holder will be willing to offer Skilled Worker sponsorship? Will the government extend the duration of the Graduate route visa, in line with competitor markets? This uncertainty is anxiety-inducing for international graduates, many of whom have major concerns about their longer-term ability to work in the UK.

It is in the best interests of all concerned with internationalisation across the sector to; support (and adequately resource) the international student (and immediate post-study) experience; educate students about post-study immigration routes into UK employment; provide clear signposting to existing higher education careers support available to international students. According to the evidence presented in this report, there is also work to do in supporting employers to capitalise on the emergence from our institutions of some of the brightest talents from around the globe.

We hope you find the report insightful and its findings prompt you to reflect on how you may be able to support this agenda. You will see some recommendations to help you consider this in our report summary.

Most of all, we invite you to share the stories of the international graduates featured in this report more widely. International graduates are a tremendous asset to the UK- we need to be mindful it stays that way and continue to offer opportunities for their voices to be heard.

We are delighted to have collaborated with AGCAS colleagues on this important piece of research into the experiences of international graduates seeking UK employment. Our special thanks to members of the AGCAS Internationalisation Task Group, Florence Reedy, AGCAS Policy and Research Manager, who authored this report, as well as Gemma Green, former AGCAS Head of External Relations, who led this project with us from the outset.

We would also like to thank the [International Student Employability Group](#) (ISEG), who have supported our research.

**Helen Atkinson and Jim Campbell, AGCAS Internationalisation Task Group**

**February 2023**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2021 the UK launched the Graduate route visa, allowing international students to remain in the UK to seek work for a two-year period (three years for PhD candidates) after graduation.

In April 2022, AGCAS embarked on a research project designed to capture the experiences of international graduates seeking employment in the UK following the launch of the Graduate route visa.

Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data collected through an initial survey and follow-up focus groups, our aim is to better understand the facilitators and barriers to success for international graduates who choose to remain in the UK on completion of their studies.

The experiences of international graduates detailed in this report reveal some significant barriers to seeking employment post-study. Issues with visa applications and a lack of information about UK employment can result in challenging transitions into the UK labour market for international students. A lack of knowledge and resistance to employing international graduates/those requiring visas from employers can make finding work in the UK much more difficult for international graduates. Welfare challenges and a lack of support can limit international graduates' ability to remain in the UK and pursue employment post-study.

It is clear that a collective effort is needed, to provide international students and graduates with the support they deserve, and help the UK retain its edge in a competitive international recruitment market.

This project is part of broader efforts to support international student employability, with AGCAS working as part of the International Student Employability Group (ISEG) in partnership with the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), Universities UK International (UUKi), the Institute of Student Employers (ISE), the British Universities International Liaison Association (BUILA), British Council and Independent HE (IHE).

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

### International graduates and UK employment: Survey findings

- Of the 345 survey responses analysed, 293 had a Graduate route visa (85%) and 52 had a Skilled Worker visa (15%).
- The majority of graduate respondents (63%) had studied at the Higher degree level, mainly by taught course (MA, MSc, MBA), followed by Undergraduate degree level (23%) and Higher degree, mainly by research (10%).
- The majority of respondents were employed full-time (60%) and 26% were unemployed at the time of the survey.
- 72% of those employed via the Graduate route were in a graduate-level role (SOC code 1-3).

- 42% of graduates applied for over 50 roles since leaving university
- 79% of international graduates received support from their university careers service.
- Graduates were employed by a wide range of organisation types, including multinationals, SMEs, charities, and public sector organisations.
- 58% of international graduates suggested that their expectations of post-study work visas were being met, 18% were undecided, and 24% did not think their expectations were being met.

## Facilitators

Facilitators for international graduates remaining in the UK post-study are categorised into the following areas: positive Graduate route application, UK providing opportunities for international graduates, university support, employer support, and work experience and skill development.

- Positive Graduate route application represents a positive experience and perception of the Graduate route.
- The UK providing opportunities is the notion that remaining in the UK provides employment and lifestyle opportunities for international graduates.
- University support refers to support provided to international graduates by their university which facilitates them to stay in the UK and gain employment post-study.
- Employer support represents international graduates' initial experiences with employers. Positive transitions into the labour market are impacted by these initial experiences including transparency from employers about their ability to provide sponsorship, employers' level of experience employing and working with international graduates, and how welcoming employers are towards international graduates.
- Work experience and skill development can facilitate international graduates to improve their employment prospects.

## Barriers

Barriers for international graduates remaining in the UK post-study are categorised into the following areas: employer resistance and lack of knowledge, lack of information, visa issues, employment issues, and living in the UK.

- Employer resistance and lack of knowledge represents employers' attitudes towards and knowledge of post-study visas/employing international graduates. Lack of knowledge and employer resistance or prejudice can significantly impact international graduates' experiences of finding employment post-study.
- Lack of information can be a barrier to international graduates as having the knowledge or right information on visas, employment rights, recruitment practices, and cultural norms is important for those pursuing post-study employment in the UK.
- Visa issues encompass the challenges that international graduates experienced with their post-study visas including high costs, visa limitations, and a lack of government support with visas.

- Employment issues refer to the difficulties international graduates experienced seeking employment. Themes include difficulties finding employment, precarious employment, and differences related to subject studied and employer size.
- Living in the UK outlines the barriers faced in relation to living in the UK as an international graduate. This includes welfare issues such as a lack of available housing, mental and physical health issues, and financial concerns. It also includes the perception of the UK as unwelcoming for international graduates.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Policy makers

- As a minimum, maintain the existing commitments of the Graduate route to provide stability. Ideally extend its length, to compete with post-study work offerings from other international markets (e.g. Australia).
- Add time remaining on the Student visa to Graduate route visa length to ensure international graduates do not lose time when applying early to the Graduate route.
- Remove the Immigration Skills Charge for employers switching an employee from the Graduate to Skilled Worker route.
- Lead a cross-government campaign to enhance employers' understanding and awareness of the Graduate and Skilled Worker immigration routes.
- Improve government information/messaging on the Graduate and Skilled Worker visa routes for international students and employers.
- Identify a targeted solution to capture international graduate data as part of the Graduate Outcomes survey, to generate evidence.
- Better joined up/collaborative working between relevant government departments (e.g. Home Office, DfE) to improve the visa/immigration system and ensure international students can go on to make an even greater contribution to the cultural and economic prosperity of the UK.
- Work with the ONS to improve transparency and understanding over temporary versus permanent migration.
- All employers, but particularly SMEs, receive improved government support to address challenges around the uncertainty of changing government policies and mitigate potential risks.

### Employers

- Where appropriate, make use of resources such as the ISEG guide to recruiting international students<sup>2</sup> to raise organisational awareness of post-study visa routes and the benefits of using them.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/uploads/files/1/Page/ISEG/Recruiting\\_International\\_Graduates-FINAL.pdf](https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/uploads/files/1/Page/ISEG/Recruiting_International_Graduates-FINAL.pdf)

- Collaborate further with universities to engage with international students whilst they are at university and build international student awareness of employers which support the Graduate route and/or sponsor international graduates.
- Raise awareness with the government of the challenges faced by employers, particularly SMEs, in regard to potential risks associated with hiring international graduates due to uncertainty and lack of resource and lobby for improved messaging and stability for graduate visa routes.
- Support the potential for the extension of the Graduate route visa to enable employment of international graduates into roles/graduate schemes that are longer than two years.

### **Universities**

- Allocate sufficient resource to support the international student experience across the student journey (e.g. in visa support/compliance, international student support, careers & alumni teams).
- Provide clear signposting and communication to international students on when (and how) to apply for the Graduate route visa.
- Provide support for international graduates to develop awareness of longer-term immigration routes and how they can use their time on the Graduate route to support their longer-term goals.
- Organise joint alumni-careers panel events featuring international graduates in UK employment
- Consider messaging used to communicate employability with key influencers supporting the international student experience, e.g. parents and agents.
- Feature and promote case studies from international graduates who have secured UK graduate employment.
- Provide resource for supporting the collection of destination data on international graduates.

### **Careers and Employability Services**

- Provide clear signposting of the wider Careers and Employability Service offer to international students (e.g. career planning support, interview coaching, etc.), including as part of pre-arrival support.
- Develop online courses (using university VLEs and Careers and Employability Service software) and/or deliver workshops (e.g. during International Welcome/ induction) to introduce students to UK recruitment timings and terminology.
- Collaborate with other university teams supporting the international student experience, e.g. delivering joint workshops on the Graduate/Skilled Worker route with visa and immigration team colleagues and/or employability webinars for prospective students with international recruitment.
- Develop training for international recruitment colleagues and agents to help manage international student expectations of securing UK graduate employment.
- Work with employer engagement teams to ensure confident conversations around inclusive recruitment practices and advocate for the entire student community.

- Emphasise the need for resilience and perseverance during the recruitment process in messaging for international students & graduate and the importance of making use of careers and employability services.
- Promote the value of work experience and networking to international students and source/create opportunities for networking/work experience for international students
- Brief students on what to expect during UK graduate recruitment fairs (since these can be very different to what students may be used to in their home country).
- Promote guidance on recruiting international students to employers, e.g. as part of recruitment fair planning, or in employer newsletters.
- Build 'graduate internship' schemes with SME contacts, providing international graduates with the opportunity to gain graduate-level experience without requiring employer sponsorship.
- Gather case studies and success stories from international students and graduates- and promote these appropriately.
- Identify employers (existing or new contacts) who embrace international students and offer them prioritised promotion opportunities to come to campus and deliver sessions.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

The introduction of a new immigration route for international graduates has undoubtedly been one of the contributing factors to the UK surpassing its target (a decade early) for the number of international students studying in the UK<sup>3</sup>. Under the Graduate route, international students can remain in the UK to seek work for a two-year period (three years for PhD candidates), thus providing flexible opportunities for international graduates to gain UK employment and enable employers to recruit from a global talent pool without requiring a sponsor licence.

Although not all international graduates choose to remain in the UK post-study, the announcement and subsequent launch of the Graduate route in July 2021 has certainly proved popular with international recruitment markets. UCAS have already reported significant increases in non-EU student recruitment<sup>4</sup> and predict that the volume of international undergraduate applicants will increase by 46% to 208,500 by 2026<sup>5</sup>.

This is excellent news for individual institutions and their local communities, for the higher education (HE) sector as a whole, and for the economic prosperity of the UK<sup>6</sup>. The consolidation of this early success will depend on the quality of the international student experience and on positive post-study outcomes. However, on both counts, the current policy context<sup>7</sup> sends contradictory messages. To many in the sector, it is disappointing that gathering international graduate outcomes data has been scaled back<sup>8</sup> at a time when the government has pledged to 'work with the sector to enhance the evidence base on international graduate outcomes' (Action 5, International Education Strategy, 2019<sup>9</sup>). Furthermore, a recent policy note by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) found that only 3% of employers had knowingly used the Graduate route to employ international graduates, with 27% not familiar with the Graduate route option<sup>10</sup>.

In the interests of enhancing a dwindling body of evidence, AGCAS, led by its Internationalisation Task Group, initiated a project to develop our knowledge of the outcomes of international students choosing to remain in the UK after graduation.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/explore-uuki/international-student-recruitment/international-student-recruitment-data>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/uk-universities-and-colleges-see-record-applications-key-international-markets-ucas-launches>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/uk-continues-be-top-destination-study-applications-set-rise-almost-50-within-five-years>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/09/09/international-students-are-worth-28-8-billion-to-the-uk/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/04/26/international-employability-when-policy-halts-progress/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/blog/11-11-2021/approach-surveying-international-graduates>

<sup>9</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/799349/International\\_Education\\_Strategy\\_Accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/799349/International_Education_Strategy_Accessible.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/01/05/not-heard-of-this-employers-perceptions-of-the-uks-graduate-route-visa%ef%b9%bc/>

Our aim is to build a clearer picture of the effectiveness of the Graduate route, to gain insights into the facilitators and barriers to international graduates' success in securing UK employment. This does not signify that the outcomes of international students choosing to remain in the UK are more important than those who return home (or go elsewhere); it was our chosen area of focus given the absence of research and data in this area currently.

## **1.2 Methods**

### **1.2.1 Survey**

International graduates were invited to complete a survey to tell us more about their experiences of searching and applying for employment in the UK. The survey ran from 25 March to 29 April 2022 and was open to undergraduate and postgraduate international students, who had completed their studies at a UK university after 1 July 2021 (the launch date for the Graduate route).

We were particularly keen to understand how international graduates perceived employers' knowledge of post-study immigration routes and whether there were specific characteristics or circumstances which had enabled international graduates to find work. Importantly, the research sought to humanise the experiences of international graduates remaining in the UK by providing them with a platform to share their first-hand experiences. We also invited graduates to share a supplementary case study to talk about their approaches to job seeking and how they had navigated the visa application process. Mindful of the recent HEPI/Kaplan report<sup>11</sup> on careers and employability support for international students, we also invited comment on their use of university careers services.

The project had the support of member organisations of the International Student Employability Group (ISEG)<sup>12</sup>, which formed in response to the findings of the AGCAS/UUKi/UKCISA Supporting International Graduate Employability: Making Good on the Promise report<sup>13</sup>.

The survey received 1011 responses, resulting in 396 usable responses post-data cleansing. We then conducted analysis on responses from 345 graduates who held either a Graduate route or Skilled Worker visa.

### **1.2.2 Focus groups**

Following the survey, we conducted focus groups with international graduates to hear more about their experiences and complement the survey data already gathered. We recruited focus group participants through survey respondents who had already provided consent to take part in follow-up activity, plus additional participants who did not complete the survey sourced through AGCAS members and networks.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/10/14/international-students-need-more-relevant-careers-support-if-uk-is-to-remain-a-destination-of-choice/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Research--Policy/Policy--lobbying/International-Student-Employability-Group>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.agcas.org.uk/knowledge-Centre/33c566da-dcc1-44d1-b8a8-95935b3b0ab8>



We conducted seven focus groups, one of which was made up of international graduates who were unemployed at the time of the survey. The timing of the focus groups coincided with a stakeholder engagement exercise by the Scottish Government to inform the development of a new strategy for international education to promote Scotland's education offer globally. In support of that process, a decision was taken to hold one Scotland specific focus group which a colleague from the Scottish Government observed. The other focus groups included a mix of international graduates. Focus group participants were from a range of countries and had studied a range of subjects. The majority were on the Graduate route visa, but some had other visas including the Start-up visa, Skilled Worker visa, and Student visa. Each focus group had four to eight participants, a total of 31 focus group participants across the seven groups.

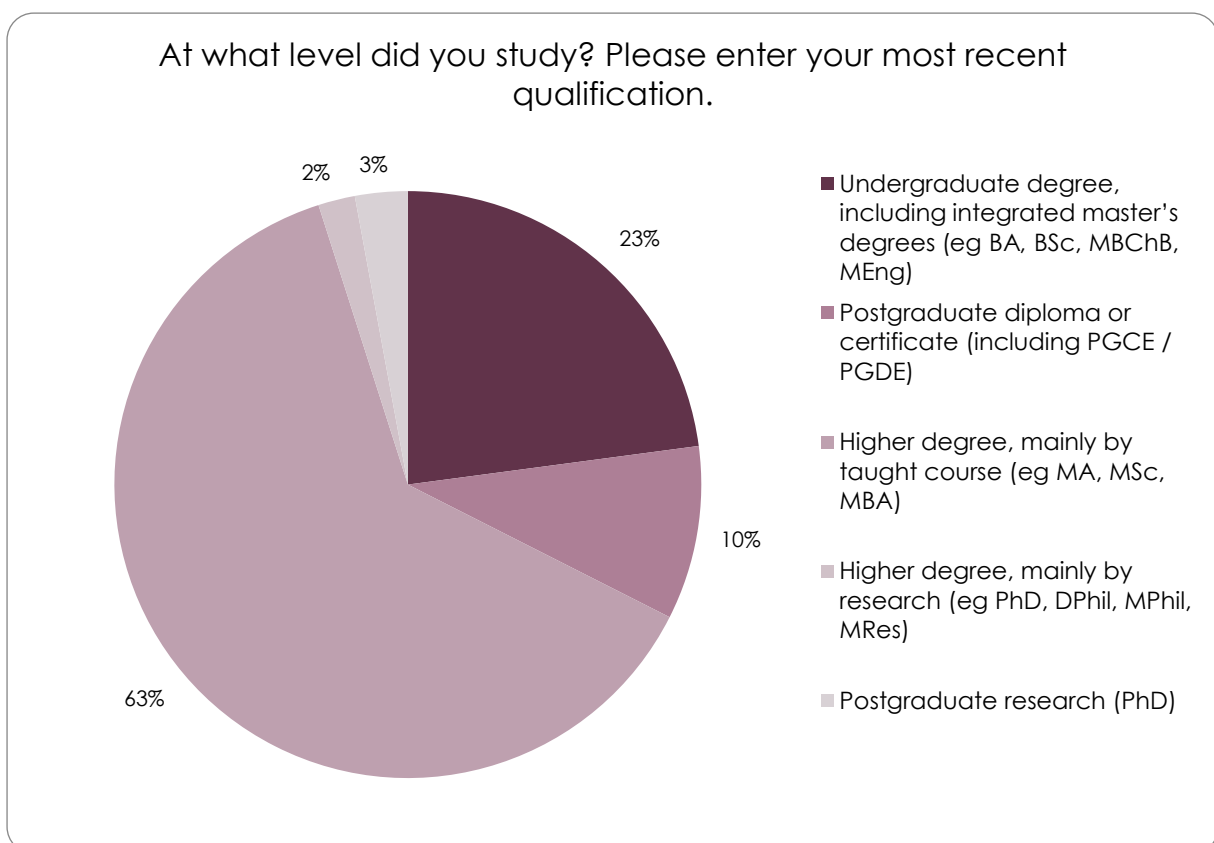
## 2. INTERNATIONAL GRADUATES AND UK EMPLOYMENT: SURVEY FINDINGS

This section details the survey findings of the 345 international graduates on the Graduate route or Skilled Worker visa. It includes findings on international graduates' study in relation to their employment outcomes and visa type. It also details the findings from thematic analysis of free-text survey comments on international graduates' perceptions/expectations of their visas, and perceptions of employer attitudes and knowledge in relation to employing international graduates on post-study work visas.

### 2.1 International graduate level of study

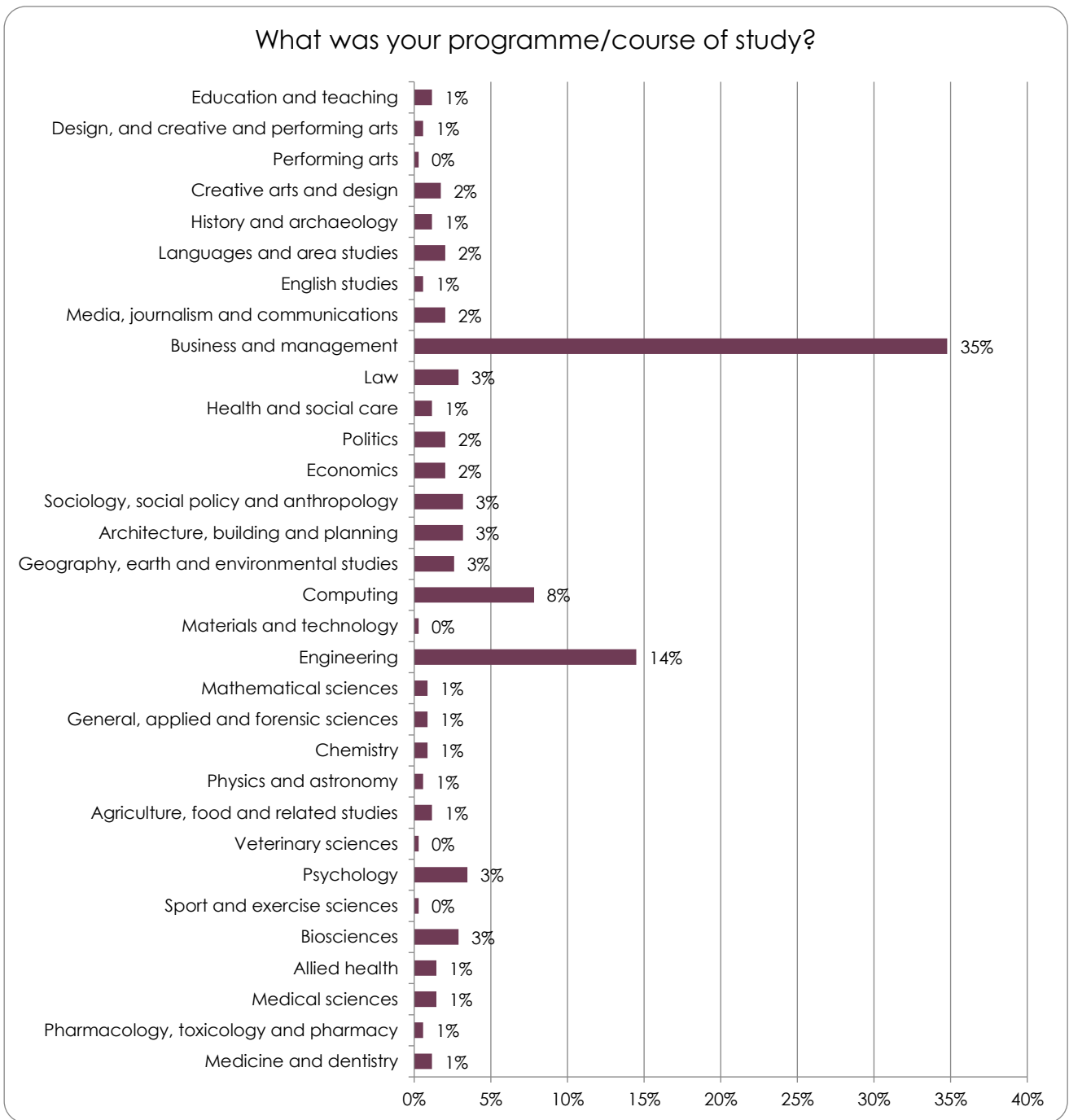
The majority of graduate respondents (63%) had studied at the Higher degree level, mainly by taught course (MA, MSc, MBA), followed by Undergraduate degree level (23%) and Higher degree, mainly by research (10%).

Figure 1 Level of study



The top three disciplines studied were Business and management (35%), Engineering (14%), and Computing (8%). 71 nationalities were represented.

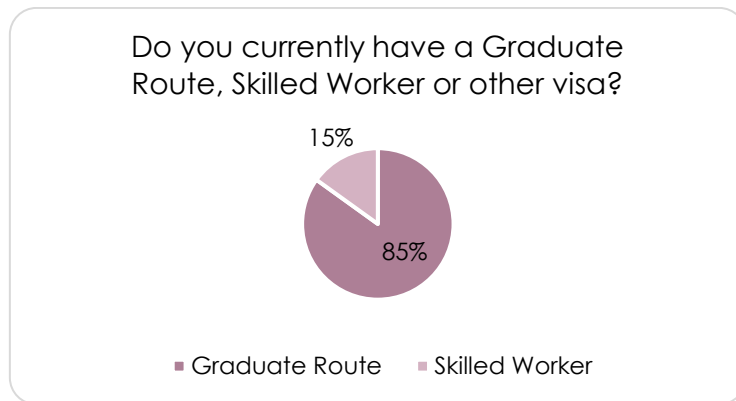
Figure 2 Programme/course of study



## 2.2 Employment visa

Of the 345 responses analysed, 293 had a Graduate route visa (85%) and 52 had a Skilled Worker visa (15%). For the majority (98%), this was their first visa since leaving university.

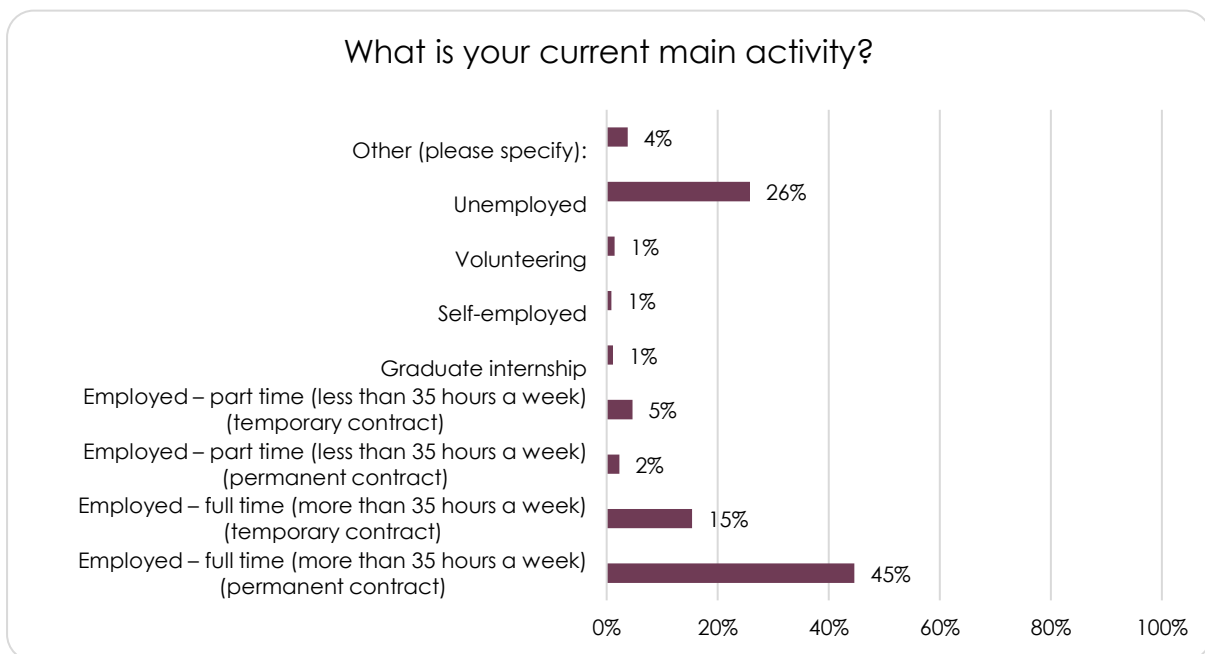
Figure 3 Employment visa



### 2.3 Current employment

The majority of respondents were employed full-time (60%) and 26% were unemployed at the time of the survey.

Figure 4 Current activity

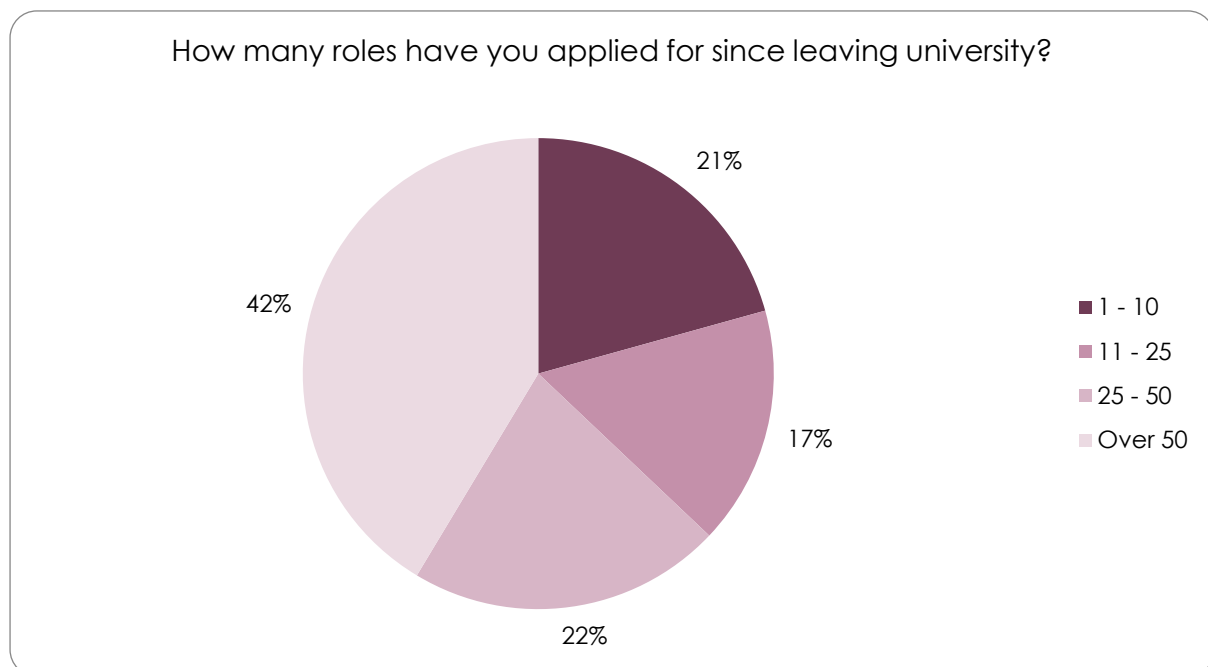


Of those that were employed, the majority (54%) started their current role within three months of finishing their course. 33% started three to six months after finishing their course and 14% started more than six months after finishing their course.

We were interested to understand how many international graduates with a Graduate route visa were working in a graduate-level role, and therefore SOC-coded their responses<sup>14</sup>. Job roles were varied but 72% of those employed via the Graduate route were in a graduate-level role. International graduates on both the Skilled Worker and Graduate route were employed across a wide range of sectors, with business, IT, engineering, and education the most prominent. Graduates were employed by a wide range of organisation types, including multinationals, SMEs, charities, and public sector organisations. 33% of graduates were in job roles on the skills shortages list<sup>15</sup>. A recent Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) policy note suggested that international graduates can help fill skill shortages in the UK<sup>16</sup>.

42% of graduates applied for over 50 roles since leaving university, suggesting that perseverance is important in gaining employment for international graduates.

Figure 5 Number of roles applied for since leaving university



International graduates worked across a range of UK regions with the most in London (29%), followed by South-West England (11%).

<sup>14</sup> Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) coding:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/standardoccupationalclassification/soc>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skilled-worker-visa-shortage-occupations/skilled-worker-visa-shortage-occupations>

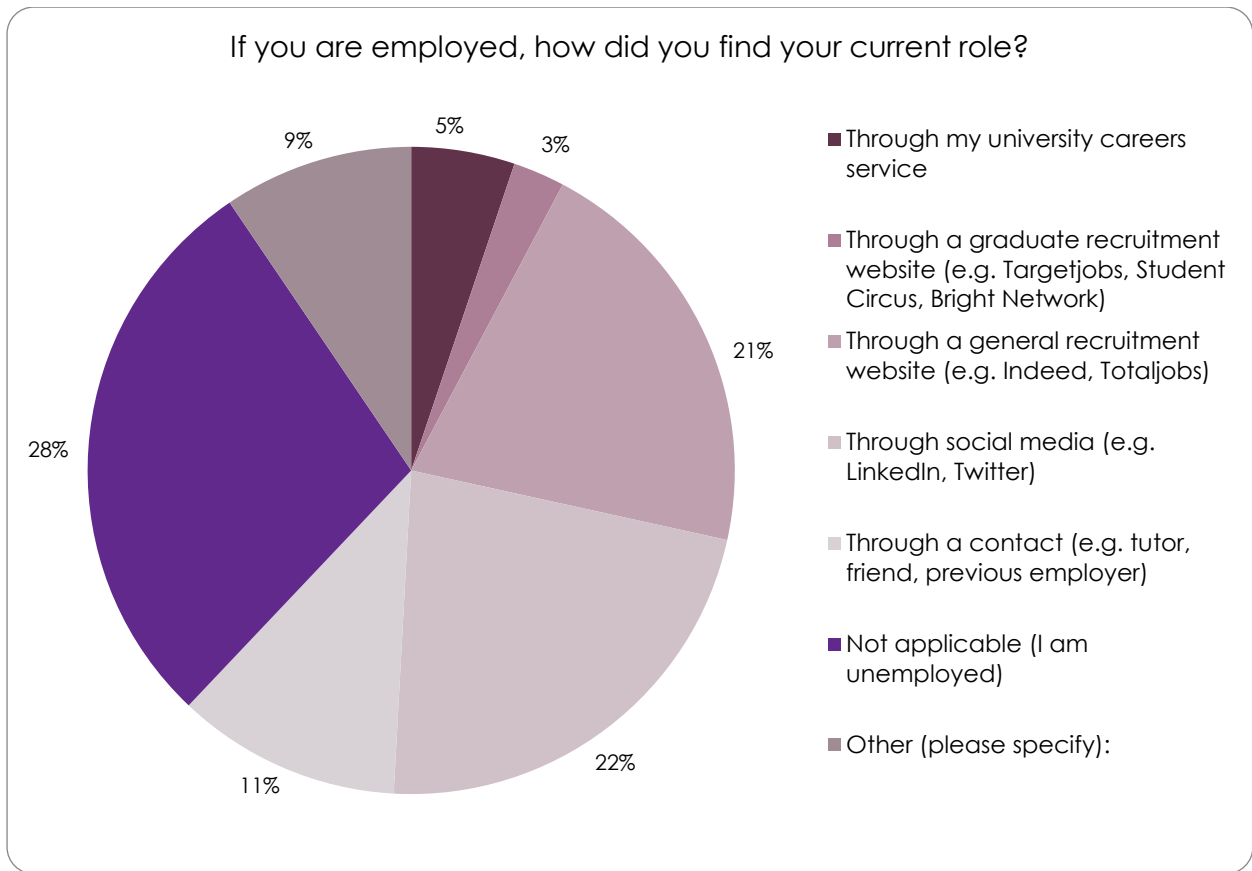
<sup>16</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Not-heard-of-this-Employers-perceptions-of-the-UKs-Graduate-Route-visa.pdf>

Table 1 Region of contracted place to work

Answer Choice		Response Percent	Response Total
1	North East (England)	7.8%	14
2	North West (England)	6.7%	12
3	Yorkshire and the Humber	5.6%	10
4	East Midlands (England)	3.9%	7
5	West Midlands (England)	8.9%	16
6	East of England	3.3%	6
7	London	29.4%	53
8	South East (England)	7.2%	13
9	South West (England)	10.6%	19
10	Scotland	8.3%	15
11	Wales	3.9%	7
12	Northern Ireland	0.0%	0
13	I am contracted to work remotely	4.4%	8
<b>Feel free to supply additional information:</b>			16
<b>answered</b>			<b>180</b>

Graduates found their roles through various means, but many used recruitment websites and social media to find their role.

Figure 6 Sourcing of current role

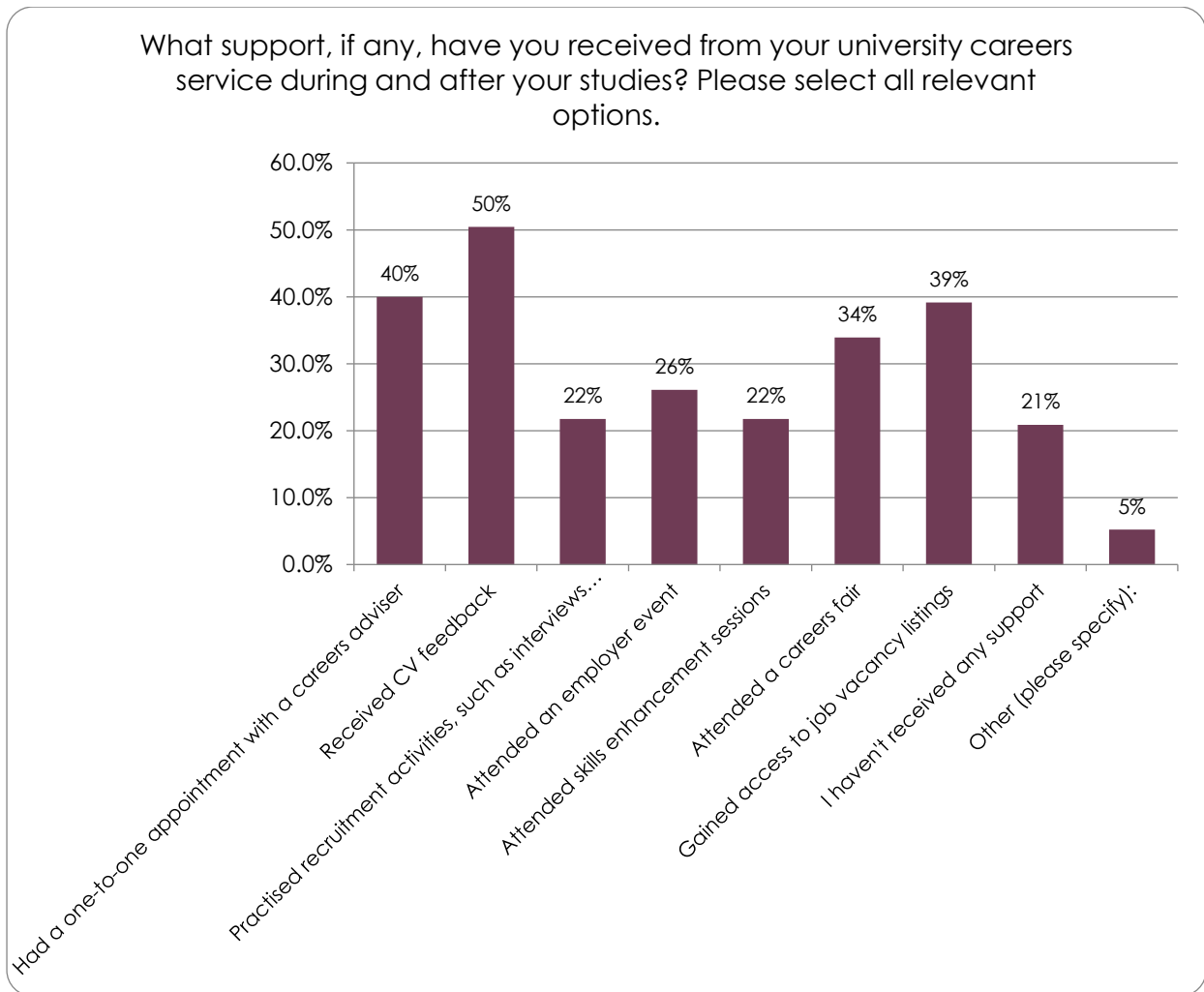


We conducted further analysis of 200 results which were those that included additional information on subject studied, course level, job title, role and organisation. Of those 200, 25 had no link between their course level/subject studied and their employment sector and/or job role, 20 had some link between their course level/subject studied and their employment sector and/or job role, but the majority (150, 75%) had a strong link between their course level/subject studied and their employment sector and/or job role. Five respondents did not provide enough information to establish whether there was any link.

#### 2.4 Factors of “success”

79% of international graduates received support from their university careers service. The most popular support received included receiving CV feedback (50%), one-to-one appointments with a careers advisor (40%), and gaining access to job vacancy listings (39%).

Figure 7 Careers service support



Of the 207 international graduates in full-time employment, 60 had used their careers service in some way (26%). Of those 60, 60% received CV feedback and 50% had a one-to-one appointment with a careers advisor, 47% gained access to job vacancy listings and 42% attended a careers fair. Half (50%) of those 60 had gained their full-time position less than three months after completing their course, highlighting the potential impact of careers and employability service engagement. Furthermore, 7% suggested they found their current role through their careers service.

134 (59%) full-time employed international graduates had studied for a Higher degree, mainly by taught course (e.g. MA, MSc, MBA). Of all UK regions the highest number of full-time employed graduates worked within London (31%) with the least working in Yorkshire and the Humber (4%) and Northern Ireland (0%). 37% of full-time employed graduates had applied for more than 50 roles since leaving university. 33% suggested they found their current role through social media e.g. LinkedIn, Twitter.

Free-text survey comments suggested that perseverance is key to success, as well as starting the process of trying to gain work and experience early:



“Keep trying”, “Make use of every opportunity”, “Apply as early as you can”, “Start early”, “Apply as much as you can”, “Prepare yourself for work as soon as possible during your degree.”

These results suggest that there may be links between use of careers service, degree level, region where international graduates seek work, number of roles applied for or persistence in applications, social media use and international graduate “success” in gaining full-time graduate employment. However, this indicates correlation and not necessarily causation. Focus group data provided later in this report explores these factors further.

## 2.5 Expectations and experiences of post-study work visas

Some 58% of international graduates suggested that their expectations of post-study work visas were being met, 18% were undecided, and 24% did not think their expectations were being met.

As part of this question in the survey we asked graduates to elaborate on their expectations vs. reality. Analysis of free-text comments resulted in 13 codes, organised into six themes. The most frequent code was *provides opportunity* (coded in 70 of 300 comments), followed by *not accepted/understood by employers* (coded in 60 of 300 comments), and *difficulties finding work* (coded in 29 of 300 comments).

Table 2 Expectations of post-study work visas free-text themes and codes

Theme	Codes	N. of codes	Quote examples
Opportunities	Offers more time/flexibility	20	- “It has given me the opportunity of time. I’ve been able to look for work, my employer wasn’t worried about my visa expiration date, I have enough time to gain relevant work experience and to get a Skilled Worker visa.” - “The Graduate visa provided time to source suitable work and removed any barriers to working i.e. no sponsorship needed.”
	Attractive to employers	1	- “Before my Graduate visa, I received less attention from employers. Once I had it, I started getting interviews.”
	Provides opportunity	75	- “The visa is what I expected it to be. It allows me to work in whatever sector I want to gain experience in and allows me to transition to a different visa if need be.” - “My expectations of the Graduate route visa are being met in that I am able to work in a permanent full-time job that I

			<p>otherwise would not have been able to land"</p> <p>- "I have all the benefits of a UK citizen, i.e. right to live and work." (Participant on Skilled Worker visa)</p>
	Straightforward application process	29	<p>- "I got my post-study visa in 2 weeks, it was a straightforward application"</p> <p>- "It was quick"</p>
Negative employer attitudes/understanding	Not accepted/understood by employers	60	<p>- "Some employers don't seem to understand/know what the Graduate visa entails, and confusion with sponsorship etc."</p> <p>- "The requirement of sponsorship in future has resulted in hesitation in recruitment by potential employers."</p>
	Prejudice/discrimination	10	- "No one is ready to employ a foreigner"
Cost	Expensive	9	<p>- "I think it is too expensive"</p> <p>- "It's not easy to apply for this visa since the app didn't work. Also the visa doesn't count toward the permanent resident scheme so it's like I pay almost £2000 for almost nothing."</p>
Visa limitations	Temporary	20	- "This is because my goal was to acquire British Citizenship and ILR (indefinite leave to remain) and I am not sure whether the time I am spending in UK doing hard work is even counted towards the time to get an ILR"
	Limited	13	- "Having to be tied down to one employer for your extent of your skilled worker visa is an archaic concept and limits your career progression within UK" (Participant on Skilled Worker visa)
	Uncertainty	2	- "But there is still a degree of uncertainty in terms of transition from Graduate route to being sponsored after two years."
Difficult application process	Time consuming	9	- "I was unable to get my visa quicker than I expected as the Priority and Super Priority services have been suspended"
Difficulties gaining employment	Difficulties finding work	39	<p>- "I thought a Graduate visa would open the doors of employment for me, but it didn't."</p> <p>- "Very hard to get jobs especially for the course I have chosen due to eligibility criteria that effects international students"</p>
	Lack of university support	3	- "No support from University as well."

We explored visa costs and expectations of visas further in the focus groups, the results of which are detailed in the next part of this report.

## 2.6 Perceptions of employers' knowledge and attitudes

Questions 22 and 23 in the survey asked international graduates about employers' knowledge about and attitudes towards hiring international graduates who required a visa to work in the UK post-study. Thematic analysis of responses resulted in three themes each for knowledge and attitudes. These had several smaller codes which were categorised into themes. For the question on knowledge, *lack of knowledge* was the most frequent code, coded in 45 of the 88 free-text comments. *Employer resistance* was the next most frequent, coded 18 times. For the employer attitudes question the most frequent code was *employer resistance* (coded in 61 of 92 free-text comments), followed by *time limited* (coded in 12 of 92 free-text comments). These themes were explored further in the focus groups outlined in the next part of this report.

Table 3 Employer knowledge free-text themes and codes

Theme	Codes	N. of codes	Quote examples
Levels of knowledge	Lack of knowledge	45	- "Employers are unaware of the process and may feel daunted by it" - "I don't believe all employers fully understand what post-study work visa is." - "Employers had no idea about the visa. I had to explain my situation during my interviews."
	Adequate knowledge	7	- "A baseline awareness of the options" - "I think employers have a good enough knowledge of the post-study visa"
	Good knowledge	7	- "Well-aware of it" - "My employers were very knowledgeable and knew about the options"
	Varied knowledge	3	- "Employers vary in the amount of knowledge on the post-study work visa. Some knew lots, some knew nothing."
	Large vs. small organisations	6	- "Most of the big companies have good knowledge of Graduate visa and how easy it would be for them to sponsor people with Graduate visa than what it was earlier. But almost all of the small and medium companies are still unaware of the new rules and hence reluctant to take on people with Graduate visa."

	Knowledgeable individuals	1	- "University had dedicated staff who were up to date on the various work visa options."
Employer resistance	Employer resistance	18	- "Limited knowledge -still wouldn't employ you for a permanent role upon realising you only hold a two-year visa" - "The moment companies find out that a candidate requires sponsorship they back out."
	Costs	3	- "Employers don't want to hire us, because we are becoming a cost burden for the organisation"
Employer experience	Inclusive	1	- "Most employers are accepting of different cultures and nationals"
	Familiar/experience	1	- "Some of my colleagues have more knowledge of it, but that's because they are Careers Advisors, so it's their job to know. The University of Glasgow is a registered sponsor and, according to the website, have a clear and established process for managing the visas for international employees."

Table 4 Employer attitudes free-text themes and codes

Theme	Codes	N. of codes	Quote examples
Negative employer attitudes	Employer resistance	61	- "I only applied to a few companies but I feel like there is a huge resistance to hiring people who need a visa." - "9/10 employers don't want to recruit someone who is here on a 2 year Post-study work visa" - "Apart from the top companies that can sponsor visa, other employers are quite straight forward and you don't even get the chance to be interviewed when they realise you require a visa."
	Time limited	12	- "Most employers are not happy to sponsor international students and would prefer that the post study visa duration is longer" - "They are looking for people who is having long term visas"
	Withdrawing offers	1	- "I secured one job but when I told them that I am on Graduate route, they simply refused to hire me."

	Costs	4	- "Employers will do anything not to hire someone who requires a visa because it's too expensive for them to sponsor"
	Lack of knowledge	4	- "Employers still have no idea clearly about this visa. They refuse to understand why it is essential to give international graduates a chance even if they can't sponsor in the future."
	Lack of certainty	1	- "The only thing that bothers me is that at the moment I do have a secure permanent job but in the future, i.e by the end of my Graduate visa, I don't have the guarantee that I will get a sponsorship from the current employer"
Variation in attitudes	Neutral attitude	6	- "They are fair when it comes to recruiting graduates that require a visa."
	Varied attitudes	5	- "Some companies do consider recruiting international graduates who require a visa and they are interested in knowing more about us first, since a few invited me to do the assessments/interviews and also went through many stages when I was still using my Student visa."
	Large vs. small organisations	6	- "As mentioned earlier, big companies ask for candidates who are eligible to work in the UK when joining them and they have no issue in sponsoring them after joining. But, small and medium companies asks that only those candidates who have ILR or UK passport can apply for the roles."
Positive employer attitudes	Inclusive	1	- "Some firms strongly believe in Diversity and Inclusion, introducing large group of people from different background with a common interest. I found it very open in terms of hiring and onboarding of people into the firm."
	Positive attitude	6	- "Again, my employer is a registered sponsor, so it appears that they are fairly open-minded about hiring international employees"

The free-text comments reveal that many of the international graduates experienced resistance from employers and found that employers' lack of knowledge about the Graduate route or Skilled Worker visa was a barrier to finding employment. These barriers were explored further in the focus groups, the findings of which are presented in the following sections of this report.

## 3. FACILITATORS TO UK EMPLOYMENT

This section explores the facilitators for international graduates to remain in the UK beyond their study. It outlines the thematic analysis findings from the focus groups which are categorised into the following key areas: positive Graduate route application, UK providing opportunities for international graduates, university support, employer support, and work experience and skill development.

### 3.1 Positive Graduate route application

This area includes three themes: straightforward application process, peer support and more time and flexibility. These three themes facilitate international graduates to remain in the UK and pursue employment.

#### 3.1.1 Straightforward application process

International graduates suggested that the application process for the Graduate route visa had an impact on their experience of remaining in the UK. Those who found the process to be straightforward and quick were able to begin applying for jobs and were relieved of any anxiety about being able to stay in the UK for at least two years:

*"I felt really worried about that to be honest, but I got it quite quickly, it only just took about three days. That's just so funny because I thought that it would take more than one month."*

Many of the focus group participants referred to being surprised at how straightforward the application process was for the Graduate route, suggesting that they had been concerned that it would be a longer, more complicated process:

*"I mean there was a myth going on when I was applying for the visa that it's a long process and it's tricky"*

*"I thought it was really, really hard to do it, but I don't know why. But I just tried to do what they wanted, you know, attach the document and take a picture. But the process was really interesting, because I thought it would be hard. But I just sorted it out quite quickly"*

A straightforward application process allowed international graduates to start their journey of finding post-university employment in the UK positively, without the added concern of waiting to find out if their visa application was successful.

### **3.1.2 Peer support**

Another aspect which supported a positive visa application experience for international graduates was peer support. Focus group participants referred to asking their peers for help and advice with their application:

*“So when you see people who have similar experiences, or who understand the experience and explain it to you, they'd be able to guide you.”*

It was suggested that peers were able to provide support that was more understanding and were more approachable due to having gone through the same experience:

*“The fact that it's a peer that you're speaking to really helps with relieving that anxiety and feeling comfortable”.*

### **3.1.3 More time/flexibility**

In relation to the Graduate route, international graduates discussed the benefits of securing a visa which allowed them two years to remain in the UK to develop their skills and pursue employment, particularly in comparison to previous approaches to remaining in the UK:

*“It's a very attractive scheme and a nice visa at offer, because initially, people used to worry, if they don't find jobs within four or six months, they would have to go back to their country, but the Graduate visa gives you two years.”*

*“I came to the UK in 2017, I have two master's degrees, because of my work within the university, so they have to extend my visa several times. But at the time I came to the UK it was just the four months on the visa, after four months you're going back to your country. But when the introduction of the new visa [Graduate route] came in I saw it as an opportunity for me to be able to stay and be able to explore my options.”*

Many of the focus group participants saw the Graduate route visa as an opportunity to develop work experience with a broader range of employers for the two years, in order to secure sponsorship later on:

*“Before coming to the UK, I think, my expectation of the Graduate route was that it will buy me more time to prepare, and to be part of the interviews and also get some sort of experience whether it's a temporary experience, because many of the employers that don't sponsor they would still like to hire you for maybe a year or two on the post-study work visa.”*

The time offered by the Graduate route also allowed those international graduates who did not know exactly what sector or job they wanted to pursue more time to explore their options and try out different jobs:

*“Two years is a good time to work and also experiment and keep trying for the job that you really want to get into.”*

These themes represent a positive experience and perception of applying for a Graduate route/post-study visa. This initial positive experience can support international graduates to feel confident in the early stages of their process of remaining in the UK post-study, easing their transitions into the UK labour market.

### **3.2 UK providing opportunities for international graduates**

Relating to the Graduate route visa providing more time and flexibility to gain employment and experience, a key factor of international graduates' desire to remain in the UK post-study was the perception that remaining in the UK provides opportunities. Thematic analysis of the focus groups resulted in two themes relating to this area: attractiveness to employers and provides employment opportunities.

#### **3.2.1 Attractiveness to employers**

Participants referred to the fact that some employers are keen to hire international graduates as they have different skills which can support an organisation:

*“I do also think in certain sectors, which have a very positive understanding of the Graduate visa and why it's worth doing and sponsoring people is that, for certain employers they recognise the importance of having international employees with international backgrounds, because they bring a lot of skills they need”*

*“In terms of the experience, a lot of us do have international work experience or worked in global companies, leading global teams as well. If you look at the level at which people are being hired, even for simple graduate profiles as well, they are hiring international students at a significantly higher profile when compared to other students.”*

The perception that international graduates are making a valuable contribution to UK employers facilitates international graduate confidence in applying for jobs and remaining in the UK post-study.

#### **3.2.2 Provides employment opportunities**

This theme was developed from focus group discussions about why international graduates had



chosen to remain in the UK post-study. A key factor in this decision for many of the participants was the notion that the UK has wider employment opportunities, or valuable opportunities within particular sectors:

*"It's this really great option for a graduate student to have after they finish their programme because there's hardly any restrictions other than working in, I think, sports or something. To really be able to work anywhere full-time, I thought was just such a great aspect of it."*

*"I came to study in the UK because international development is really famous in the UK. That's why I came. What I feel, I think the visa is really helpful for me because it is opening up my new career, giving me new work experience in the UK."*

The Graduate route visa also allows international graduates the time to experience employment in the UK, providing an opportunity for experiences which foster personal and professional development:

*"I think the visa just helps us to have more new experiences. Having a new experience also changes my perspectives. That's what I feel."*

International graduates are encouraged to remain in the UK post-study and are made to feel valued and confident in their search for employment, due to these perceptions of opportunities available to those who remain. However, this optimism may wane over time if there is little evidence of return on investment for international graduates.

### **3.3 University support**

Focus group participants referred to various types of support provided by their university which facilitated them to stay in the UK post-study. These included general careers and employability service support, the university providing bespoke advice for international students, and a positive university experience.

#### **3.3.1 General careers and employability service support**

International graduates in the focus groups were generally positive about the support they had received from their careers and employability services during and post-study:

*"My experience with my careers service, it was great. I'm not going to lie, they would always send us emails every week saying if you need any help with your career services, you can come and seek help"*

*"I was overwhelmed by the support I received. It was more than I could have asked for."*

Specific support that international graduates referred to as helpful included support with CVs and cover letters, as well as interview support and practice:

*"I've been using the careers service in my university since first year, so I started very early. Then I just keep improving on those skills. I used them a lot. Actually, I did a mock interview with them and the same question literally came up for my actual interview. That was really helpful."*

*"When I approached them, I said I want to be more confident about my interviews and improve my CV, if you can review that. It turned out for me to be very helpful. From the first meeting, we started talking about my skills, expertise, how can I introduce myself better? We did quite a lot of workshops which really helped, actually. My university careers service felt very, very useful, and not just for me but my other class fellows, friends, they used that service too and they really felt satisfied."*

Participants also noted that their Careers and Employability Services provided support beyond graduation, with some having lifetime support for their international graduates:

*"Participant 1: I would definitely tell them to study at my university because I know the services that they offer there.*

*Participant 2: My university offers their careers service up to five years after you leave uni.*

*Participant 3: Oh yes. Mine is lifetime. Sorry, I'm not boasting or anything. [laughs]"*

Some graduates specifically cited their university careers service as the reason they were successful in gaining graduate employment:

*"I did feel supported to some extent and I got into an NHS graduate scheme, which was through the support from my university careers service. That was great."*

One participant even advised another international graduate to seek support from their careers service due to a positive experience they had:

*"I don't know about your university, because in my university, they really helped me with that. Most of the time, when you're about to apply for your job or go for interviews, sometimes they help you prepare your CV. Not help you. They just put you through how to work on your CV, so that you can actually get a job or prepare you for interviews as well."*

Through the support from their careers and employability services graduates felt that they developed their knowledge and skills, improved their confidence, and enhanced their CVs, covering letters and interview techniques. This was an important facilitator for many graduates in securing post-study employment.

### **3.3.2 Universities providing bespoke/tailored advice for international students**

Other support which was referred to by international graduates was specific to information and advice about securing post-study work visas, or bespoke/tailored advice for international students. This was referred to as being provided by careers and employability services and the wider university:

*"There was an exceptional opportunity at my university. They actually brought in somebody...they were somebody who was able to get a Skilled Worker visa. They went through the entire process of what it's like to apply, what a certificate and sponsorship number is, how companies get a certificate of sponsorship number, how many they can have and its good information."*

This presentation, which was provided by their university, facilitated this international graduate to consider their longer-term plans, such as sponsorship, providing them with information that could help them with the process of remaining in the UK in the longer-term post-study.

Many participants also mentioned the importance of bespoke/tailored support for international students, provided by either a Careers and Employability Service or a specific team supporting international students:

*"I think we had a huge advantage in the last year that I've worked for the university careers service because one of our careers managers was on a secondment from her role which had normally been in the International Student Support team. So she was working on getting accredited or getting her qualification as a careers advisor and was able to couple her knowledge from previously working with international students into the realm of careers advising. And that was great, she was the number one person to go to with any queries about both of those things coupled together."*

More bespoke support for international students in relation to careers and employability can be an important facilitator for international graduates remaining in the UK post-study. Having access to those who are knowledgeable about both careers and employability and visas/issues affecting international students, potentially through cross-university initiatives and events, would enable these to be addressed in tandem.

### **3.3.3 Positive university experience**

Many of the focus group participants referred to their university experience as positive, suggesting that their study was valuable and that their university provided a welcoming environment for international students:

*"With respect to study, I absolutely loved it. It was very welcoming and there were expert courses and lecturers. It was a good experience for me."*

Some participants expressed that their university course provided them with opportunities that would otherwise not be available to them:

*"I mean, while studying in my university, I had opportunities to do stuff for free. I had a quick study trip to Northern Ireland. It was amazing. I got a volunteering scholarship to India to live for a month. It was amazing. All these sponsored by the government. In terms of that opportunity that exists within the country for international students, while you study. I'll give that one an eight [out of ten]. Helps your study experience."*

These experiences gained whilst at university not only developed international graduate confidence and skills but also allowed them to learn about and adapt to UK culture prior to seeking employment:

*"I think for me, I'll tell anyone, if there's something you really want to do, you really want to learn or you want to learn more about people's culture, I think the UK is a very welcoming place to be and I think I'll tell anyone it's up to you to decide if you want to stay or if you want to go back. I think it's a place for you to learn different things and just meet with people."*

A positive university experience can have an impact on international graduates' ability to transition into the UK labour market, secure a visa, and find employment. Another AGCAS study found that early experiences of transitions into the labour market have a longer-term impact on graduates' experiences and perceptions of finding employment, with a risk of longer-term scarring for those with initial negative experiences<sup>17</sup>. The support and experience provided by universities for international students/graduates can therefore be an important facilitator for international graduates remaining in the UK post-study.

### **3.4 Employer support**

Another aspect of international graduate transitions into the labour market post-study is their initial experience with employers. Focus group participants referred to different types of employer support that facilitated them in securing post-study employment and remaining in the UK. These include transparency from employers, employer experience with international students and visas, and welcoming employers.

#### **3.4.1 Transparency from employers**

In the focus groups it was suggested that improved transparency from employers would be useful for international graduates hoping to remain in the UK longer-term and secure sponsorship. This suggestion specifically relates to securing sponsored employment i.e. through the Skilled Worker Route, rather than the Graduate route. Participants noted that it would be helpful to have more clarity on which

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.agcas.org.uk/Graduates-experiences-of-Covid-19>

employers could potentially provide sponsorship in the future, prior to being at the stage of seeking sponsorship:

*"It's quite time-consuming trying to find out who can sponsor my visa in the future, who's got the license in the first place to sponsor my visa. Maybe a bit of transparency in that area would be very nice. Just maybe to come up with an Excel sheet of all the companies that could sponsor the visa in the future."*

Some international graduates suggested that despite employers being registered sponsors, they would not necessarily want to sponsor them, or might choose to stop being registered sponsors. Having an up-to-date list of sponsors could be helpful for international graduates in their longer-term planning:

*"I think for me it would be a list of the employers that actually sponsor the visa. Obviously, for me personally, I want to go for the Skilled Worker visa rather than just the post-study one. I'm looking for the long term, and it will be helpful if the list of the employers with sponsorship could be updated more often with the location precisely, and that's like the likeliness of whether they're going to use that on the new candidate, because obviously, they hold it, but it's not necessary that they would hire a new person"*

Similarly, it was pointed out that the list of registered sponsors is not user-friendly and can be difficult to navigate:

*"I think the register of licensed sponsors, it doesn't get updated enough, and also because it's just a nightmare to navigate. There's no way of filtering it out through structures or anything."*

More transparency from employers and a clearer, regularly updated system for finding registered sponsors could facilitate international graduates in their longer-term planning for remaining in the UK post-study.

### **3.4.2 Employer experience with international graduates and visas**

In the focus groups, discussions around employer support highlighted that employers who had prior experience with international graduates and hiring those on visas were more likely to employ additional international graduates and offer support for their transitions into employment:

*"I think when I started looking out for jobs-- a few of them who were established employers and have been there for some time, they are aware of the post-study work visas."*

*"I think since my company is a bigger organisation, I'll say I think they are a huge employer and I think in the UK they employ the greatest number of international students. So I think it wasn't a problem for them to sponsor an international student."*

Employers with prior experience of hiring international graduates were more likely to have systems in place for supporting international students and knowledge of the process of hiring someone on a visa:

*"I'd like to think that it was just, you know, my great professional qualifications and experience that got me my job. But of course, when you think about things logistically and practically, I applied to a job at an employer that is a registered sponsor, that had a system in place, and as a university has some knowledge of the Graduate route visa and different pathways for their international students after they've left the university."*

Employers that are experienced with employing international graduates are more likely to have the knowledge and confidence to employ further international graduates and provide adequate support for them. Focus group participants also expressed that they would feel more inclined to apply for roles with employers who they knew had experience recruiting international graduates.

### **3.4.3 Welcoming employers**

Similarly, employers that were perceived as welcoming to international students were considered more attractive to international graduates:

*"Once you find a good welcoming employer, that's a very different story because you feel settled"*

Welcoming employers were those who were perceived to embrace cultural differences and show an interest in the wider lives of international employees:

*"Because of my organisation, I think the culture is totally different. They always cared about me, my work, and also my project, and also my life, my daily life, like that work life balance."*

*"My organisation is really open to any kind of things, especially my culture and my background-- for example, North and South Korea's history."*

Feeling accepted within an organisation contributed to international graduates feeling secure and settled within the UK post-study:

*"They're very accommodating. It feels like home now, here. It's good."*

### **3.5 Work experience and skill development**

In the focus groups international graduates discussed ways of improving their employment prospects in order to gain employment post-study. The themes for this area include Planning ahead and starting early, Perseverance, Networking, Skill development and Work experience.

### **3.5.1 Planning ahead and starting early**

In all of the focus groups international graduates referred to the importance of planning for graduate employment as early as possible in their studies. Participants referred to career planning even prior to their studies, particularly those on shorter courses such as a one year taught Postgraduate degree:

*"My focus is on the time schedule but employers they tend to hire a long time before graduation. That means a lot of students are missing out because they didn't apply in time, especially for people like me who have a one-year masters. It means we have to use our research before we even start our studies."*

*"I'll say really start applying as soon as you come into the country, especially if you're a masters student where you just have one year and you almost know the kind of jobs that you want to do afterwards, start applying as soon as you come into the country."*

Many international graduates referred to graduate schemes in relation to planning ahead, noting that the timings of graduate scheme recruitment meant that planning ahead was a necessity:

*"I think not just me, most of the graduates who are coming to the UK are not aware of the fact that they should start applying as soon as they start the course, because the graduate schemes start a year later or in a particular timeline."*

Similarly, international graduates noted that they wished they had started earlier with their job applications, rather than waiting until they had secured their Graduate route visa:

*"I wish that I had known that I could start applying to employers, to different roles right away. I spent a lot of time just waiting to secure a Graduate route visa when I could have been making headway in the application process and the job search process."*

*"Finding those openings through different platforms is something that we really need to start early rather than after graduating."*

Planning ahead and starting early was a key theme across the focus groups, suggesting that it is an important facilitator for international graduates pursuing employment post-study.

### **3.5.2 Perseverance**

Related to planning ahead and starting early, discussions in the focus groups revealed that perseverance is key when it comes to securing post-study work for international graduates. Many had experienced rejections but emphasised that they found employment after persevering with job applications:

*“When I got four rejections, I was crying so much. It's time to go back to Korea. I cannot do it anymore. But I just want to say, please do not give up, keep going, because I got a job when I applied for the fifth time, fifth, so that's why just to not give up.”*

Understanding that rejections are part of the job application process for all graduates and persevering despite them was an important lesson for many international graduates:

*“I think there are a few things that I as a student wish I had known about before seeking employment in the UK. Firstly, the process of finding a job, finding the job according to the skill set and according to the programme that I have done, it could be a bit long and difficult. It's very important here to be patient and try and keep on applying to jobs even if there are no responses from the prospective employers.”*

Developing resilience in the face of rejection is key for all graduates but can be daunting for those who are seeking employment in order to remain in the UK post-study, and who are used to different cultural practices in regard to seeking employment. Perseverance and determination are important attributes for international graduates when seeking post-study employment.

### **3.5.3 Networking**

Whilst persevering, focus group participants highlighted the importance of developing their networks in order to secure post-study employment:

*“My opinion is to network with a lot of people, attend careers fairs and network with people”*

Participants considered social media, particularly LinkedIn, an important tool for networking with potential employers:

*“Number one, because the UK job market, it is heavily based on networking and the awareness you have of your personal brand. It's important for students to learn how to optimise their LinkedIn and leverage their network”*

*“I noticed employees also like you to have a LinkedIn presence. All the applications I put in, they were always asking for my LinkedIn profile just to check through and see who I'm connecting with, what I post online. It might seem insignificant to applicants but to employers here in the UK, I think it's one of the things that they pride themselves in as well.”*

One participant suggested that they had gained their employment through LinkedIn as their employer reached out to them on the platform:

*“So I would encourage them to set up their LinkedIn profile, because I think this is the most important tool to get a job. For me it worked like a charm getting me a job because I was setting up my LinkedIn profile on a daily basis, whatever experience I was getting through volunteering, and by attending*



*different courses. So it was very helpful for me, because many recruiters reached out to me by themselves. And that, that is how I got the job as well."*

Networking, both in person and through social media platforms, can provide international graduates with employer and recruiter contacts and emphasises their professional profile/brand.

### **3.5.4 Work experience**

A key facilitator theme across the focus groups was the importance of work experience for international graduates seeking post-study employment. Participants suggested that gaining work experience, including volunteering, whilst at university was particularly important in order to build their CVs and attract employers:

*"If I would advise anybody, try as much as possible to gather a lot of experience. You can start with volunteering, which is something that I had to do just to boost my experience. I had to volunteer with, organisations just to ensure that I immerse myself into the UK system so as to get enough experience"*

Participants noted the importance of work experience for the development of skills which can facilitate international graduates in gaining employment:

*"So for me I just did a volunteering role in at the university. I wouldn't say it was technical experience but I would still say that it really helped me build my interpersonal skills and communication skills. So I think that somehow helps but I know some people who did internships as well from some of the bigger organisations during the summer. So that really helped them as well, and they are now working as well."*

Participants also referred to gaining sector specific or UK based work experience:

*"I think experience is really important as well. Specifically, in the type of role that you have applied for. So you should have some sort of experience either a student internship, or some proper industry experience that you have maybe from your own country, from wherever you come from initially. So I think that also plays a major role"*

*"I'll also say, in terms of experience, it's very important that you try to get UK work experience because that's one thing I've heard over time or it's great that you have all this experience but we really need somebody that understands the climate, somebody that understands the sector."*

Work experience during university can facilitate international graduates to develop experience and skills which are transferable for post-study employment. It can also provide experience in specific sectors, supporting career planning and developing international graduates' CVs in particular areas.

### **3.5.5 Skill development**

Related to work experience, international graduates discussed other forms of skill development such as attending short, skills-based courses and webinars:

*"I attended lots of webinars from-- Especially UN agencies, also international NGOs, because I am really interested in education. Especially I worked in Rwanda for other literacy education, so that's why I was just searching lots of webinars."*

*"I love to learn, and it's easier for me to look for these courses. Also, these courses are sent by the career consultants in my university. I know that it's well-researched, and it's something that they've been suggesting to the other students as well. It helped me to talk about it to the employees as well."*

Participants also referred to skill development whilst at university, through careers and employability service support.

These themes highlight the approaches international graduates are taking to pursue post-study employment. By developing their skills, experience, confidence and networks alongside early career planning and perseverance international graduates are maximising their employability and finding ways to appear attractive to prospective employers.

## 4. BARRIERS TO UK EMPLOYMENT

This section explores the barriers experienced by international graduates who remain in the UK beyond their study to seek employment. It outlines the thematic analysis findings from the focus groups which are categorised into the following key areas: employer resistance and lack of knowledge, lack of information, visa issues, employment issues, and living in the UK.

### 4.1 Employer resistance and lack of knowledge

This area of analysis explores employers' attitudes and knowledge in relation to employing international graduates. This expands on some of the themes explored in the free-text comments of the survey and includes 3 themes: lack of knowledge, employer resistance and prejudice/discrimination.

#### 4.1.1 Lack of knowledge

A theme across the focus groups was a perceived lack of employer knowledge in relation to employing international graduates on a visa. Participants referred to a lack of employer knowledge as barrier to gaining employment:

*"But to echo points that were made about the lack of employer knowledge. I mean that's a huge gap as well, because I might be able to say I need a visa and you have to take me on, I wouldn't say it, of course, in those terms but the employer might go ahead and say, well we don't know how we can make that possible, and that can definitely be a brick wall for many students trying to transition into the world of work."*

*"As far as the employer attitudes I find that they either are very unaware of the types of visas that are out there to hire internationals. I've always accepted that it was going to be my responsibility at that point of the conversation, to really try to educate them about how the visa works and any stipulations around it. I think at the end of the day they're so eager to just fill their roles that they just want a yes or no answer, and they don't really want to sit and explore any back and forth and options and things like that to support you and make sure that you're able to work with them."*

Employers may also have inaccurate knowledge of international graduate visas, potentially causing them to reject international graduates unnecessarily:

*"It's funny because most recruiters don't even know how the Graduate visa works. It's funny because I remember having an interview one time with a big company. It was the first stage and when the interviewer asked the kind of visa I had and I said the Graduate visa, she was like doesn't that limit you in terms of the number of hours you can work?"*

Even those who were successful in gaining employment found themselves having to educate employers about the process of employing someone on a visa and what to do in regard to sponsorship:

*"I find myself having to educate employers, whether I'm applying to them, or I've already applied to them, I have to tell them what exactly the process is, what sort of software or website they have to go to request certificates, sponsorship numbers."*

This lack of employer knowledge can be a significant barrier to international graduates pursuing employment post-study. Inadequate or inaccurate knowledge can lead to employers feeling unable to employ those on post-study visas.

#### **4.1.2 Employer resistance**

Relating to a lack of employer knowledge, participants referred to resistance from employers in employing international graduates. There was a perception that employers would prefer to hire those who would not require sponsorship:

*"I think, for some of them they will actually tell you 'we'll get back to you' but never call back. So most times it is a block because I think some of them really might be interested in knowing more about you and also want to learn about your culture, where you come from, what you can bring to the table. But the moment they hear about sponsorship they just most of the time withdraw. Because to them, why would they give it to someone when they can actually get someone that they won't have to provide sponsorship to."*

*"I made two applications to one company and on the application form in the first application I put there I will need a visa to take the job, and on the second application I put I don't need a visa and I got through, passed the interview and all of that but then I had to decline."*

Even with the Graduate route visa meaning sponsorship would not be required for two years post-study international graduates encountered employer resistance due to their need for sponsorship in the long-term:

*"If you talk to the company like the recruiters and stuff like that, they will say, 'oh, you're an international student. I'm sorry, we can't take you.' Even if you do discuss the Graduate visa option that, 'Hey, you don't require to do that immediately,' they're like, 'I'm sorry.' The question is you would require or you may require in the future. It's a straightaway no. The actual point of somebody who's ready to sponsor you, even if the profile that you are applying for roles in the critical shortage list they are like, 'No, I'm sorry.'"*

*"I just got blanket rejections as soon as they found out that I was an immigrant, as soon as they found out that-- even if I didn't need visa sponsorship, even if I was just applying for a position for six months and my visa allows me to work for two years, I just get flat out no's"*

This reveals resistance to employing those who require sponsorship in the future, even with the two years provided by the Graduate route visa. This is a significant barrier to international graduates seeking employment post-study. This also suggests that the benefits of the Graduate route need to be more clearly conveyed to employers to reduce employer resistance.

#### **4.1.3 Prejudice/discrimination**

Beyond a resistance to employing those that require sponsorship, some international graduates referred to experiences of outright employer prejudice and discrimination:

*"I had a bit of discrimination experience, but that was not during my interview or like when I got my profile selected. Because in the last year alone, I have had three jobs. Personally, I have felt discriminated against by my managers or by my team members. That's my personal experience."*

This instance resulted in this international graduate finding employment elsewhere, meaning that even those who secure post-study employment may face ongoing challenges.

One student referred to being discriminated against in applications as their name revealed that they were international to potential employers:

*"There is an elephant in the room we need to talk about in terms of Chinese students from mainland China. There is some social discrimination here because when we send CVs to employers, they can't see what kind of visa we have, but they can see my real name, which they can tell which part of the world we come from and that becomes a lot of the problem."*

Other participants referred to attitudes towards immigration resulting in prejudice towards international students:

*"For the most part it's frustrating for me personally and it's not an international student issue, it's an immigration issue because I no longer need a visa to work because I'm on a Dependency visa, I moved here with my partner, who's working very hard with the NHS right now. So I don't need a visa or anything, I'm just very forward in my cover letter saying that I have the right to work here. And for some reason it's just very difficult to find a job in Scotland."*

These themes reveal the impact of employer attitudes towards and knowledge of post-study visas for international graduates seeking post-study employment. Lack of knowledge and employer resistance or prejudice can make it difficult for international graduates to find employment beyond their study.

#### **4.2 Lack of information**

In the focus groups various issues around a lack of information were highlighted. Themes include lack of information, timings, lack of university support, and cultural differences.

#### **4.2.1 Lack of information**

International graduates referred to not always having the knowledge or right information when they were pursuing post-study employment. In relation to post-study visas, participants suggested that information changes so quickly that the information they were provided with was often out of date:

*"All the universities in the UK have the same information on their platform. However, the Home Office consistently change their information and the university website doesn't get updated, until they have employed the right person who understands this problem and is kind of rooting for international students."*

Another challenge highlighted was the lack of sufficient information on international graduate rights in relation to work and visas:

*"I didn't know that an employer is not legally allowed to reject me as a candidate, just because I need a visa. So I felt like that was information I should have had much earlier in my process of thinking about working in the UK, and then actually going out and applying."*

Information about application and interview processes was also cited as important for international graduates as without this time is spent working out the recruitment process through trial and error:

*"I've had so many interviews and they were competency-based interviews just like first-round interviews, but the main thing was, I didn't know how to basically answer those questions sometimes, and you are always in limbo like, did I answer that accordingly or did I say too little? It probably took me six months, but that could be avoided and the process could be much easier if I knew what was going to basically happen after I leave university, and how these companies are recruiting."*

This information is available through university careers and employability services but requires international students/graduates to engage in careers and employability provision at their universities.

Without sufficient information, international graduates may not have the knowledge they need in relation to visas, their employment rights and recruitment practices. This can be a significant barrier to those remaining in the UK post-study and pursuing employment. It is also imperative that international graduates have sufficient information in relation to their employment rights to avoid them becoming vulnerable to exploitation.

#### **4.2.2 Timings**

Focus group participants raised concerns regarding the timing of visa applications and recruitment cycles.

Some participants suggested that they were not aware of graduate schemes and that the timing of graduate scheme recruitment meant that they missed out on applying:

*"So in my country we don't have something called graduate schemes or industry placements that you have here. So I wish I had known about these before I joined, or by the time I applied because we did have a careers fair I remember. So I joined in September 2020 and we did have a careers fair but I think it would be much more beneficial for me because I got to talk to a lot of recruiters but I was not aware of what a graduate scheme is, so that would have been extremely helpful information."*

*"My focus is on the time schedule but employers they tend to hire a long time before graduation. That means a lot of students are missing out because they didn't apply in time, especially for people like me who have a one-year masters"*

Ensuring international graduates are aware of graduate schemes and recruitment cycles at the start of their study, or even before their studies commence, could avoid this timing issue.

Another timing related barrier mentioned by participants is the transition between the Student visa and the Graduate route visa. International graduates felt that they lost time on their Student visa because they were encouraged to apply for the Graduate route visa before their Student visa expired to be eligible for full-time employment:

*"I could have used those three extra months which were an extension of my Tier-4 visa because that's the way it works. Six months after my course completion, I had those three months extra, but I had to give them up because according to the laws-- This information was passed to me by my recruiter. They came back to me after I got this job, and I was still on the Tier-4 visa. That's when they said, 'Okay, you need to switch to a Graduate visa immediately, because it's not allowed to pursue a permanent role on a Tier-4 Student visa.' I wish I had known this earlier."*

*"I got advice from the visa department in my university as well. They told me that with a Student visa, you cannot sign a permanent contract. That's why I had to lose the couple of months that I had left for my Student visa. Basically, I lose that one and apply to the Graduate route before I start searching for a job. Now, I'm on the Graduate route, even though I should have been using my Tier-4 at the moment. I think that is a problem. If the remaining months from the Student visa could be added to the Graduate route, it would be very helpful for us as well."*

A lack of information about the timings of recruitment and visas, or information not being given at the right time can be a barrier for international graduates, causing them to potentially lose time when they are limited to two years (or three years for PhD graduates) on the Graduate route.

#### **4.2.3 Lack of university support**

The facilitator of university support, including careers and employability service support can equally be

considered a barrier when the support is lacking. For some international graduates the support they received was considered to be inadequate and further support would have been beneficial.

One participant found their careers and employability service helpful but found that the support offered was limited post-graduation:

*"I got some help from the career service when I was a student. I had to do a little bit of legwork sometimes to find them. To find the sort of seminars and the job fairs and things like that, but it's fine. The thing that was frustrating for me, I guess is that after I graduated, the support from my university just dried up and they just redirected me to their website constantly. The website just had some really general information about how to nail an interview or how to write a cover letter, and not really how to speak to employers about visas, what kinds of employers are more likely to want to sponsor your visa, that kind of thing. It was quite poor advice for international students really."*

Another participant felt that their university's links with industry were not helpful for international students as the employers that they met with on campus did not want to employ international graduates:

*"To be honest, universities pose themselves to be the link between graduates and employers but at the end of the day you find out that it's just a sham, so to speak, because they come to campus, they tell you about the job they've got for you and then as a graduate or as someone who is almost done with university, you would expect to have a fair chance with other people to compete. What they tell you is send us an email and after that, you send an email, you try to follow up and then you hear nothing from them again."*

This perhaps suggests a misalignment between the expectations vs. reality of a UK careers and employability services for some international students.

One participant noted that university support can be disconnected, in that careers and employability services, international student support teams, and other stakeholders such as the government are not linked in their support:

*"I think in careers services there's a lot of signposting, but again, it's not clear which authority or stakeholder is the best person to signpost to. On one hand, I hear colleagues that refer students to the International Student Support team, and then they might say, 'we are not sure about this information but go to this web page', and then a student goes to the web page, and reads something, and then a month later it could possibly change."*

Further collaborations between university careers and employability services and international student support teams could potentially improve the student experience of seeking support.

*"So to me it seems like, just going on to what was said a little bit earlier, that nobody is essentially taking responsibility for the things that they could have influence over. And it's more of along the lines of well*



*you should go to this place and start here, and then they can help you out with what your personal needs are. But in reality I think there are many stakeholders in play that have responsibilities for different things"*

Clearly, inadequate support from the university, including the careers and employability service can be a barrier for international graduates, or disconnected support that exists in siloes. However, it is worth noting that most participants spoke of their university support positively, with only a few suggesting they had not received enough support.

#### **4.2.4 Cultural differences**

In the focus groups, international graduates discussed cultural differences that they had experienced as challenging. These tended to be cultural differences in applications and recruitment practices. In particular, participants noted that CV formats differed in the UK from their home countries:

*"Then the last thing I'll say is, in terms of the CV formats, so back home in my country, I don't know if it applies for everybody, but one thing I realised is that the CV that works back home doesn't work here, even in terms of how the whole format of how it's supposed to be. What I did was at some point I had to use my university's career services, I had to reformat my entire CV, my entire cover letter."*

*"UK CV writing is quite specific, I would say, compared to Taiwan, which is where I'm from."*

Recruitment practices also differ across cultures, with the UK putting the emphasis on prospective employees to seek employment:

*"In India we have something called campus placements, wherein once you finish university the recruiters come to your university, and based on the accumulative average that you get you will be selected for a couple of interviews or some exams, very small technical exams. But here you need to go reach out to the recruiters. But the careers fair it helped a lot, when you get to talk to the recruiter, and see whether you both are a good fit for each other, and then try to develop your conversation from there."*

Similarly, work practices can differ across cultures, with some international graduates coming from countries which do not allow young people to work before a certain age, therefore having limited work experience:

*"The majority of students who come from Asian countries are not allowed to work before a certain age, and most undergraduate students start university at 17 or perhaps 18, so they don't have any experience."*

A lack of information can be a barrier to international graduates as having the knowledge or right information on visas, employment rights, recruitment timings and practices, and cultural norms is important for those pursuing post-study work in the UK.

### **4.3 Visa issues**

This area encompasses the issues that international graduates experienced with their post-study visas including the Cost, Visa limitations, and a Lack of government support with visas.

#### **4.3.1 Cost**

Across the focus groups international graduates suggested that the costs associated with post-study visas can be a significant barrier for those who wish to remain in the UK post-study:

*"We are international students, we are not a British, so that's why we have to prove ourselves every time and also we have to get a visa again, and again, and again, to keep extending it, so that's why it's quite tough and then there's the amount of the money, oh my God, bloody hell it's so expensive, so that's why I think that's quite hard."*

Participants commented that they already pay high tuition fees to attend university in the UK and the additional visa costs are challenging:

*"I think with the cost of the visa, the government asking graduates to pay £2000 upfront within four months after graduation, whether they have a job or not, it's really a big ask and the government should put into perspective that international students have already paid double the fees and when paying for student accommodation, they also have to pay 12 months in advance."*

International students on the Student visa are limited to 20 hours of work a week, which can make saving for the visa costs during their study a challenge:

*"I'd like to say that the visa fee is really very important. People are paying full-time fees and then you are limiting their work hours to 20 hours, but you suddenly want them to have £2000 after graduation to be able to just give to you whilst they've been having to pay rent and put up the groceries. I think it's just unfair, and I'll honestly say this because it's a study group, I feel like the government is using us to make money for the economy because we are paying double the fees."*

The cost of post-study visas can be off-putting for international graduates, limiting those who are able to remain in the UK post-study. If international graduates cannot afford the fees, they have no choice but to return home.

### **4.3.2 Visa limitations**

Despite the benefits of the Graduate route visa allowing international graduates to remain in the UK for two or three years post-study, participants were often worried about their plans beyond the two-year period. This uncertainty around the future is challenging for international graduates who are seeking to make longer-term plans:

*"I'm a little bit worried about my next step. If I wanted to work in the UK, I have to look for sponsorship or getting married to a British guy, should I do it? [laughter] So that's what I'm concerned a little bit about, but I will look for that."*

Jokes about marriage aside, this participant expressed genuine concern about their future and uncertainty about how they would continue to remain in the UK once the two years of their Graduate route elapsed.

Others were disappointed that the Graduate route visa and the two-three years (three years for PhD graduates) spent in the UK would not count towards settled status:

*"These two years on my visa won't count towards my route to settlement."*

One participant suggested that there are fewer limitations in other countries and that the UK will lose out on talented international graduates due to the limitations of UK visas:

*"For other parts of the world it's totally different. The moment you're done with university and you get a job, you have the opportunity to stay most of the time. For example, I have friends in Canada, I've lived in Germany before, I have friends there. The moment you get a job you don't have to look for sponsorship anyway, I think it's something that you should really look to do because if you want talent in your country, I see no reason why you should want them and let them go just because someone could not provide them with just a piece of paper."*

The Graduate route offers international graduates additional time post-study, allowing them to gain experience and find an employer that may be able to sponsor them longer-term. Yet, for some it exacerbates uncertainty and delays the inevitable which is the challenge of finding sponsorship to remain in the UK beyond the two-year period.

### **4.3.3 Lack of government support**

Participants suggested that a lack of support from the government in relation to visas made the process more time-consuming and difficult:

*"I would've expected the government to provide us international students that went for the Graduate route visa maybe with a mentor or social worker, for this type of visa, just because it's quite time-consuming"*

Other suggested that visas are overly politicised and this has a negative impact on the support international graduates receive from the government:

*"I get very frustrated that visas and immigration policy are very politicised, and I think that's a lot of the context and reasoning behind why information is unclear and always changing. There are more exceptions to the rules than there are actual rules when it comes to visas and immigration."*

Participants also noted that it would be useful to have a government contact to talk to as the websites they were directed to were lacking useful information:

*"We really need somebody we can talk to rather than just email or just going to a website. Even the government websites are pretty much just generic and there are a lot of nuances in the law that will allow or not allow something. We really need somebody who's going to tell us exactly how it marries with their specific situation and circumstance."*

A lack of information and support from the government was considered a barrier for international students as it made the process of remaining in the UK post-study more challenging in regard to visa applications.

Visa issues can cause challenges for international graduates hoping to remain in the UK post-study. The costs and the uncertainty caused by the Graduate route visa can be difficult for international students to navigate, particularly alongside a lack of information and support provided by the UK government.

## **4.4 Employment issues**

As well as visa challenges, international graduates discussed employment issues they had encountered. Focus group participants had experienced difficulties in gaining employment, particularly those who were seeking employment during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the challenges of precarious employment. Participants also noted differences in experience related to the subject they studied at university and differences in experiences seeking employment in large vs. small organisations or in different sectors.

### **4.4.1 Difficulties gaining employment**

In the focus groups international graduates discussed some of the challenges they encountered when seeking employment in the UK post-study. It was noted that the labour market is highly competitive and

not all international graduates are successful in gaining employment, despite having skills and expertise:

*"I think that for international students, it is very competitive and our choices are really limited. I have got so many friends that wanted to work and stay in the UK, and they are still skillful and hardworking. However, some of them had to give up because they could not find a job in the UK."*

Others suggested that it took a long time for them to find sponsorship and the process involved many rejections:

*"I fully agree it was quite difficult to find a job. It was quite difficult to find a visa sponsor. I thought that on a Graduate visa that would make it easier for employers and it would make it much more attractive and they would go, 'Oh, great, we don't have to sponsor you for a couple years. We'll just give you a temporary contract and let you work for a little while.' I was turned down many, many times simply for being a foreigner and needing visa sponsorship someday in the future."*

For some, the Covid-19 pandemic meant that they were unable to gain work experience prior to seeking full-time post-study employment and this meant finding employment was particularly difficult:

*"That year Covid and the pandemic meant we lost jobs; we couldn't have any part-time work. It was a very difficult time for us...We cannot go out, during all those lockdowns, and finding a job was actually a difficult, difficult time."*

The focus groups also involved discussions of employment precarity, with some international graduates having to rely on fixed-term or insecure employment to gain experience and financial stability, and the challenges this can present those seeking sponsorship:

*"Now it is a tricky situation, because what I have found at my university is that a lot of people enter employment on temporary contracts, and that those can persist for years where they jump from one temporary contract to another, or they get temporary extensions, and that's my current experience. Now, once the Graduate route visa time runs out that might make things very complicated for myself and others"*

#### **4.4.2 Subject studied and employer differences**

International graduates found that their experiences of seeking employment varied based on the subject they had studied at university, and the size of the employers they were applying to join.

In the focus groups it was suggested that certain subjects are more attractive to prospective employers than others, specifically STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects and more vocational courses:

*“STEM courses appear to be more in demand than non-STEM course, hence easier to get sponsorships on STEM courses than non-STEM courses”*

*“For work, I would say it depends on what subject you're doing. If you're doing healthcare, it's very easy for you, but then, if you're doing things like architecture, it's quite hard”*

The perception that certain subjects are more desirable to employers can be a barrier for international students who have studied more arts and humanities-based subjects, particularly if they are not aware of the transferable skills gained through these sorts of degrees. International graduates also felt that certain sectors were more accessible.

Similarly, international graduates tended to think that larger employers were more likely to employ them due to the infrastructure they have in place:

*“Big organisations that have a big international market or resource like universities for example, some of the big international firms as well. Other than that it's going to be very difficult to seek employment in maybe smaller employers and other sectors and especially if it's not a full-time permanent role. It might not be possible to find for example ad hoc jobs, part-time roles, et cetera. There will be very limited options.”*

*“As many others said, target big companies. Actually, I had an experience where I called a recruitment agency and I said I applied many times and I'm quite confident that I could at least get to the next stage of an interview. The recruitment agent was very honest with me saying because I'm on a Graduate route visa, most SMEs require graduates that have at least five years of visa or more which is quite impossible unless you are UK residents.”*

Despite these challenges, one participant suggested that small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) may not be listed as registered sponsors but could choose to provide sponsorship for the right employee:

*“There's also a chance to go into an SME who's not listed as a sponsor in the government's list, but then, they could sponsor you going through the process. I haven't been through that process yet, but there's still that hope.”*

Although this international graduate felt hopeful about their employment in an SME, the majority of international graduates suggested that larger employers are more receptive to employing international graduates than smaller employers.

International graduates can face significant challenges when seeking employment in the UK post-study. A challenging labour market combined with the challenges associated with the pandemic and visas meant that many international graduates struggled to find employment, with some returning to their home countries despite wanting to remain in the UK. Further challenges relate to the sorts of employers international graduates target and the way they perceive the value of their degree subject.

As the facilitators section outlined, perseverance in the face of challenges was key for many international graduates who were successful in securing post-study employment in the UK.

## **4.5 Living in the UK**

As well as issues with seeking employment and securing visas, international graduates are faced with barriers in relation to living in the UK as non-UK citizens. Themes around living in the UK include Unwelcoming and Welfare issues.

### **4.5.1 Unwelcoming**

This theme mainly applied to responses to a focus group question about how welcoming participants found the UK as a place to live, study and work. Some international graduates suggested that the UK was unwelcoming towards international graduates. In the focus groups some of the participants gave the UK a score out of ten for how welcome they felt with lower scores indicating that they found the UK unwelcoming:

*"Before I came, my estimation was around eight to be very frank, but after coming here and going through the experience, I would rate it around two."*

*"It's like the borders are open, everybody can come in. Then when everybody comes in, it's then in terms of like, how are you looking after us, how are you making sure that the people that are currently there and the people coming in are well taken care of? That would be a four."*

*"The Scottish Government have a lot to do in welcoming international students"*

Feeling unwelcome in relation to living and working in the UK can be a barrier to international students who remain in the UK post-study. It could cause international graduates to feel isolated and reduce their sense of security and feeling of being settled in the place they live.

### **4.5.2 Welfare issues**

Related to a sense of feeling unwelcome, participants referred to welfare issues which impact international graduates' experiences of remaining in the UK post-study. These relate to housing, mental health, physical health, and financial concerns.

The focus groups revealed the challenges international graduates can face in terms of finding housing in the UK, with some having to stay in Airbnb accommodation or even risk homelessness:

*"You know housing it's a very, very huge challenge. Last year in my university we had loads of international students sleeping outside, lots of them spending a fortune on Airbnbs"*

*“A lot of people experienced issues with housing and I think that's kind of a common thing as well this year.”*

A lack of available housing is a significant welfare concern regarding international students, causing them to be vulnerable to homelessness and the potential for financial troubles.

Other international graduates talked about the difficulties of opening a bank account in the UK and the toll this took on their wellbeing and mental health:

*“I had to open my bank account, but it was quite hard, so I was crying so much. I visited more than five banks”*

Similarly, physical and mental health problems can arise for international students faced with a new culture and different approaches to healthcare:

*“Then what happens is that when you come in as international students the first year, you're very naïve, and you're very innocent. You're not really aware of what is happening. There is that peer pressure that you should go out drinking. Let's go out and have alcohol.”*

*“We have to care about wellbeing, that's really important and also mental issues, and physical issues, so I just wanted to, definitely everything is really good and then I'm really satisfied to live here but like, GPs, hospitals, trying to see a doctor. It is not really easy to see a doctor.”*

Homelessness, financial issues, and health problems are significant welfare issues. International graduate welfare is extremely important and is a barrier that must be addressed for international graduates remaining in the UK post-study.

These themes represent the barriers to international students remaining in the UK post-study. Visa related challenges, employment challenges, lack of information and welfare issues are significant to international graduate's ability to remain in the UK and secure graduate employment.



## 5. SUMMARY

The experiences of international graduates detailed in this report reveal some significant barriers to seeking employment post-study. Issues with visa applications and a lack of information about UK employment can result in challenging transitions into the UK labour market for international students. A lack of knowledge and resistance from employers to employing international graduates/those requiring visas can make finding work in the UK much more difficult for international graduates. Welfare challenges and a lack of support can limit international graduates' ability to remain in the UK and pursue employment post-study.

Despite these significant challenges, international graduates see the benefits of remaining in the UK post-study and the two-three years provided by the Graduate route visa, including the employment opportunities this can present them with. However, when faced with a multitude of challenges, international graduates may have no choice but to leave the UK and return home or move elsewhere.

It is clear that a collective effort is needed if the UK is to retain its competitive edge in international graduate recruitment. It is important to celebrate and champion the introduction of the Graduate route and the opportunities this has provided for international graduates to seek employment in the UK, but this cannot be relied on alone. As much as there are many positive experiences to share, bad news travels fast. International graduates' accounts of the challenges they are facing in gaining employment in the UK will filter through to international recruitment markets. It is important to be mindful of this as other international markets look to enhance their post-study work visa options for international graduates<sup>18</sup> to address their territory's skills shortages.

Further consideration needs to be given to supporting international graduates to gain UK employment once their Graduate route visa expires (since this does not lead directly to settlement). To switch their employee to a Skilled Worker visa, most employers would need to pay additional costs<sup>19</sup>, thus creating unnecessary additional barriers to retaining talent.

There is a clear need for improved government promotion of the Graduate route (and other immigration routes) to employers, highlighting the benefits of hiring international graduate talent and educating employers<sup>20</sup>. Enhanced promotion should be accompanied by clear guidelines for employers to help demystify any perceived risks and provide reassurance.

We must do what we can now to avoid jeopardising the success of the Graduate route. Other countries have already enhanced and extended their post-study work offer to international students<sup>21</sup>. If the UK is to maintain its competitive advantage and protect its market share, we must surely commit to doing the same. The hiring of international graduates into roles on the skills shortages list can support

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<sup>18</sup> <https://thepienews.com/news/make-change-to-australias-skilled-migration-program-canberra-urged/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/uk-visa-sponsorship-employers/immigration-skills-charge>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/01/05/not-heard-of-this-just-3-of-employers-have-knowingly-used-the-graduate-route-visa-to-tackle-their-skills-shortages/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.studyinternational.com/news/uk-post-study-work-visa/>

the UK economy and enhance growth within sectors with skills shortages<sup>22</sup>.

Based on this research, we suggest the following recommendations for Careers and Employability Services, wider university teams, employers, and policy makers:

### **Policy makers**

- As a minimum, maintain the existing commitments of the Graduate route to provide stability. Ideally extend its length, to compete with post-study work offerings from other international markets (e.g. Australia).
- Add time remaining on the Student visa to Graduate route visa length to ensure international graduates do not lose time when applying early to the Graduate route.
- Remove the Immigration Skills Charge for employers switching an employee from the Graduate to Skilled Worker route.
- Lead a cross-government campaign to enhance employers' understanding and awareness of the Graduate and Skilled Worker immigration routes.
- Improve government information/messaging on the Graduate and Skilled Worker visa routes for international students and employers.
- Identify a targeted solution to capture international graduate data as part of the Graduate Outcomes survey, to generate evidence.
- Better joined up/collaborative working between relevant government departments (e.g. Home Office, DfE) to improve the visa/immigration system and ensure international students can go on to make an even greater contribution to the cultural and economic prosperity of the UK.
- Work with the ONS to improve transparency and understanding over temporary versus permanent migration.
- All employers, but particularly SMEs, receive improved government support to address challenges around the uncertainty of changing government policies and mitigate potential risks.

### **Employers**

- Where appropriate, make use of resources such as the ISEG guide to recruiting international students<sup>23</sup> to raise organisational awareness of post-study visa routes and the benefits of using them.
- Collaborate further with universities to engage with international students whilst they are at university and build international student awareness of employers which support the Graduate route and/or sponsor international graduates.
- Raise awareness with the government of the challenges faced by employers, particularly SMEs, in regard to potential risks associated with hiring international graduates due to uncertainty and lack of resource and lobby for improved messaging and stability for graduate visa routes.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/01/05/not-heard-of-this-just-3-of-employers-have-knowingly-used-the-graduate-route-visa-to-tackle-their-skills-shortages/>

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/uploads/files/1/Page/ISEG/Recruiting\\_International\\_Graduates-FINAL.pdf](https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/uploads/files/1/Page/ISEG/Recruiting_International_Graduates-FINAL.pdf)

- Support the potential for the extension of the Graduate route visa to enable employment of international graduates into roles/graduate schemes that are longer than two years.

### **Universities**

- Allocate sufficient resource to support the international student experience across the student journey (e.g. in visa support/compliance, international student support, careers & alumni teams).
- Provide clear signposting and communication to international students on when (and how) to apply for the Graduate route visa.
- Provide support for international graduates to develop awareness of longer-term immigration routes and how they can use their time on the Graduate route to support their longer-term goals.
- Organise joint alumni-careers panel events featuring international graduates in UK employment
- Consider messaging used to communicate employability with key influencers supporting the international student experience, e.g. parents and agents.
- Feature and promote case studies from international graduates who have secured UK graduate employment.
- Provide resource for supporting the collection of destination data on international graduates.

### **Careers and Employability Services**

- Provide clear signposting of the wider Careers and Employability Service offer to international students (e.g. career planning support, interview coaching, etc.), including as part of pre-arrival support.
- Develop online courses (using university VLEs and Careers and Employability Service software) and/or deliver workshops (e.g. during International Welcome/ induction) to introduce students to UK recruitment timings and terminology.
- Collaborate with other university teams supporting the international student experience, e.g. delivering joint workshops on the Graduate/Skilled Worker route with visa and immigration team colleagues and/or employability webinars for prospective students with international recruitment.
- Develop training for international recruitment colleagues and agents to help manage international student expectations of securing UK graduate employment.
- Work with employer engagement teams to ensure confident conversations around inclusive recruitment practices and advocate for the entire student community.
- Emphasise the need for resilience and perseverance during the recruitment process in messaging for international students & graduate and the importance of making use of careers and employability services.
- Promote the value of work experience and networking to international students and source/create opportunities for networking/work experience for international students

- Brief students on what to expect during UK graduate recruitment fairs (since these can be very different to what students may be used to in their home country).
- Promote guidance on recruiting international students to employers, e.g. as part of recruitment fair planning, or in employer newsletters.
- Build 'graduate internship' schemes with SME contacts, providing international graduates with the opportunity to gain graduate-level experience without requiring employer sponsorship.
- Gather case studies and success stories from international students and graduates- and promote these appropriately.
- Identify employers (existing or new contacts) who embrace international students and offer them prioritised promotion opportunities to come to campus and deliver sessions.

Many international students are career-focused, hard-working, and enthusiastic about starting their professional lives in the UK. They are ready to offer their time, commitment, and international knowledge to employers, but many are facing barriers to employment based on their visa status. The UK risks losing out on talented graduates if these barriers are not addressed. As one focus group participant put it: *"Why invest in people and let them go?"*